

Reflections from the HILLTOP (TANTUR) - Jerusalem/Bethlehem No. 2

Giovanni Scudiero IMC, Vice-President, Pax Christi

"In a state of occupation, any attempt at normal living is turned into a crime..."

I've heard it said, spend two days in the Middle East, and you can write a book, spend two months, and you can write an article; but spend two years, and you will write only a paragraph.

It is nearly three months now, and writing about my experience in Palestine feels more and more like a disrespectful violation of the mournful silence of a Land that can no longer stand the cry of "Rachel weeping for her children [that] are no more."

What I find most distressing is the sheer monotony and predictability of events. Every day always more of the same: more bombings, more occupation by IDF forces, more injuries, more killings, more destruction of houses, more anger, more frustration, more humiliation, more despair, more suicide, more missed hospital appointments, more lost working days, more missed school days, more NON-SENSE!... It may be "more bad writing" – but it is also more painful truth...

1st Friday of RAMADAN, 31 October 2003 – "What a day it has been!..."

9:00 AM – Lecture: "Contextual Theology in Palestine". Mitri Raheb is our lecturer today. A young Palestinian Lutheran Minister, Senior Pastor at the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem (or Bet Lehem, in Arabic, the "place of bread...") and Director of the recently refurbished International Center of Bethlehem (www.annadwa.org). The Center was severely damaged during the April 2002 siege of the town by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF – "force" being both an institution and a method...).

Mitri, a rather meek and peaceable looking person, dressed in his usual neat and spotless clerical dress, was detained in his own office for over 2½ hours by a group of 15 Israeli soldiers under the command of an officer about the same age as Mitri (very young!). He sitting at his desk and they training their guns on him all the while. "I did not know who among us was the most scared..." He tries, in his usual non-violent style, to engage the soldiers by unthreatening conversation. The soldiers, not being used to this kind of reaction to their behaviour, do not know what to make of it. Some refuse to engage; others make fun of him by sarcastic remarks; some respond... Mitri manages to reach by phone his Bishop in Jerusalem and to inform him of the situation. A mistake, though, to use Arabic in the conversation... The soldiers turn on him very angrily, and insult him and his "uncivilized" Arabic language - only to be reminded by Mitri that Hebrew is a close "cousin" to Arabic. Eventually, one of the soldiers softens up a bit and remarks: "You sound like a wise man." To which Mitri replies: "Wise man is one who turns an enemy into a neighbour, and not a neighbour into an enemy." At this, the commanding officer reacts furiously by shutting Mitri up and ordering his soldiers to stop talking back to him... And one would think that "wisdom" would be welcome by all!

10:00 AM - Great commotion at the checkpoint below us. Soldiers' voices blaring orders through powerful loudspeakers (everything seems to be "powerful" about them...). Hundreds of people, men and women wearing traditional black robes and white head coverings, have been kept waiting for hours for permission to proceed and board a numbers of coaches ready to take them to Haram Al'Sharif ("Temple Mount" for the Jews) in Jerusalem for the Friday prayers. Being the first Friday of Ramadan, it is an extra special day, an emotional one... Suddenly, several huge blasts are followed by smaller ones, the sound still unfamiliar to me. A cool reaction from Mitri, our Palestinian lecturer: "Just a tear gas canister and stun grenades!" Hopefully, nobody is hurt. We move to the adjacent terrace to see what's happening. We notice some women and men are let through. Everybody else is turned back. Later, I learn that clashes had broken out between Israeli

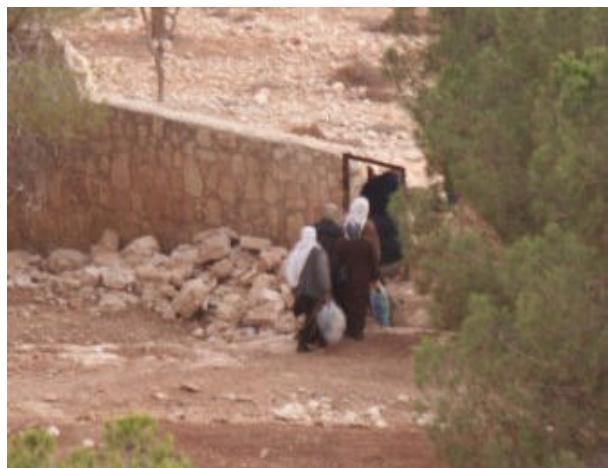


Soldiers on the Hebron Road, towards Bethlehem, preventing people from 'bypassing' the checkpoint

soldiers and Palestinian residents who wanted to cross the checkpoint of Gilo to attend prayers in Jerusalem. Israeli troops did in fact fire tear gas canisters as well as stun grenades at the worshippers gathering. At least one Palestinian civilian was wounded while two others were arrested. Among them was Mohammed Abu Gunia, cameraman for Reuters news agency. After the incident, the soldiers allowed access to women and men over 55 years of age. In Jerusalem itself, only married men over 45 and married women over 35 were allowed to enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, Islam's second holiest site, according to an Israeli police source quoted by Agence France-Presse. For the last 3 years, Haram Al-Sharif is a no-go area for men under 45. Obviously, they must all be potential "terrorists," labourers, professionals, doctors, lawyers, teachers, priests, ambulance drivers, all of them... Mohamed Ismael, the director of the mosque's guards voiced his grief over Israeli occupation and the denial of access to Friday worshippers. "Israeli occupation forces were beefed up around the mosque, with some 3,000 soldiers deployed to guard the 5,000 worshippers." However, Palestinians defied the closures and checkpoints, with 120,000 performing prayers outside the mosque many using the road pavements as "mosque".

7:00 PM – Just enjoyed a wonderful dinner. Being Italian, I know a good meal when I get one, and at Tantur I get one every day. But today it was special! I am sitting at table with Vivi, our Danish/Palestinian House Matron. She is called to the phone. It is her sister (in-law for us) from Bethlehem. She is extremely worried because her son – Vivi's nephew – is not yet home from work. She asks Vivi to please see if by any chance he has been delayed at the checkpoint. Sharon, my Methodist Minister friend, relays to me what happened next:

"Vivi, Eileen and I drove down to the checkpoint, parked on the Jerusalem side and walked through and over to the side of the road where IDF soldiers had about 20 young Palestinian men crouched down against the stone wall. When we drew near to them the soldiers came to us asking what we wanted. Vivi told them her nephew was being held and she wanted to talk to him and then she wanted him released.



Women attempting to bypass checkpoint, going through the "hole" in the perimeter wall of Tantur Institute

There were about half a dozen or more soldiers, in four military jeeps, at the curb and a long line of Palestinian men huddled and crouched down against the stone wall, close to each other to keep warm. In cotton shirts and pants, they were on their way home from working outside the West Bank area, probably in Jerusalem. Some had passes, some didn't. They had been there, under guard, for at least two hours. It was about 8:30 when we arrived and had been dark since 4:30. The soldier in charge motioned for her to go ahead and talk to her nephew. He stood as she approached and she was able to exchange a few words with him, but as she was talking with him, another man, just four or five down the line, stood up as well and leaned toward her. He was quite tall and gaunt, dark with a day's growth of beard. His hands were clasped together in front of him as though in a gesture of prayer and he had a look of desperation on his face. "Are you from Human Rights?" he asked? Vivi shook her head and the soldiers rushed toward him and yelled at him, rifles raised, to sit down and shut up.

The soldier in charge motioned to Vivi and us to step away from the men to talk. He told us he was waiting for a phone call from Mossad. "You know the Mossad?" We feigned ignorance. "Mossad! Mossad! Like FBI," he gestured vehemently to help us understand. "Mossad?? Mossad??" we feebly responded. He gave up trying to get us to understand and told us they were holding these men for questioning and that they might be terrorists. He assured us they would be released in 5 minutes. He wanted to be agreeable and was being very respectful to Vivi. We walked away knowing that the men would not be released in 5 minutes, and haunted by the image of the man leaning toward us with hands raised and cupped together, desperate for us to be "from Human Rights."

We left the checkpoint area, and were told nastily by the border guard to quit "coming in and going out." And we went back home for the evening. Sammy, the daytime receptionist was supposed to have left before 7:00 pm as his new pass that Vivi had been able to get for him was restricted to his re-entrance to the West Bank by 7:00 pm. Vivi drove him down the hill to the checkpoint and I went with them. We dropped him off, and went on an errand. Soon Vivi's cell phone rang and it was Sammy telling her that the border guards had taken his pass and torn it up into four pieces and kept it, sending him through into Bethlehem.

That means that he will have to come and go by the back way in order to get to work at Tantur. At least until Vivi can secure another pass for him. And it means that each day's work is tentative, not knowing if the guards will let him in or let him out. And it means Vivi will have to stand in long lines for many hours, days probably, in order to get another pass for him, if that's even possible.

Vivi was furious, for many reasons. So we turned the car around and went back to the checkpoint. We parked again and walked over to the little office to the side of the area where the border guards stand. Two young, male border guards were there in the office and Vivi asked why they had taken Tony's pass and torn it up. They didn't speak English. One of them spoke French, so he and I talked, while Vivi continued trying to talk with the other one who was very intent on not relating to her.

The conversation grew heated, and finally we were told to leave. Without the pass. When we walked away toward our car we saw that the long line of men they'd been holding had been released (we learned later they were kept another half hour after we were there and then released) but there were two or three new ones who were being held by the side of the road."

9:30 PM – Chilly wind blowing out there... Scores still detained, all sitting on pavement, soldiers training their guns overhead. These men, having fasted all day, are now being prevented from joining their families to break the fast. To a Muslim, this is like preventing someone from sharing Christmas dinner with the family... For "security reasons?" What security, and what reasons?

Wednesday, 5 November – "Binoculars can kill you!"

The Haaretz newspaper reports that new IDF (Israeli Defence Force) rules of engagement have been issued to soldiers operating in – or more precisely "occupying" - parts of Gaza (Netzarim) and other areas: *shoot to kill at anybody found "observing" soldiers' movements.*

Use of binoculars is considered a clear case requiring "engagement" - that is: "SHOOT!"
I may have to stop using my binoculars from the terrace of our Institute...

To prove the point, they have already bulldozed three multi-storey houses that were allegedly used as "observation" points of Israeli soldiers' movements.

Talking about shooting. There is a lot of it going on these days all around us. Hard to tell the sources and the targets.

Late afternoon, I spend over an hour on the highest terrace – yes, using my binoculars! – "observing" soldiers giving chase to mostly young men across the fields between us and Beit-Jala. I hear shots – hopefully just aimed at "scaring" them into stopping and accepting the daily humiliating routine of being herded under a tree, sitting or crouching on their knees for hours, buffeted by cold winds, waiting for when it's really dark and too late for joining the rest of the family celebrating "iftar" (breaking Ramadan fast), and then eventually be let through - back to Bethlehem nearby (if you are that lucky) or maybe, all the way to Hebron. In the latter case you might reach home by ten or eleven o'clock, just a few hours before resuming the same routine in the other direction...

Thursday, 6 November – "Another day, another lie..."

NEWS: *"IDF eases restrictions on movements of Palestinians in the West Bank."*

This latest news is fed to and noisily reported by local and international media.

FACT: Bethlehem totally sealed off to all traffic – hundreds lined up, this time in standing position, and faces to the wall, detained for hours into late afternoon. This has been happening now every day since the start of Ramadan. Is it to make sure that there is no overly joyous re-union with one's family after sundown to break fast together? Would that represent a serious threat to Israeli security?

What possible "security" advantage could Israel gain from this practice? - I asked the Jewish Co-Director of a renowned social Research Institute I met recently. *"It has nothing to do with security. This is all about teaching them a lesson..."* I still wonder what precisely that lesson might be – though I have a couple of ideas....

You can be practically sure that when the Israeli government announces with grand fanfare some sort of "humanitarian" response to the plight of the Palestinians, something "nasty" is in the offing... The "good news" is just a way of pre-emptively softening world opinion. There are many varieties of "pre-emptive attacks..."

For days and nights now: constant rumble of jetfighters and roaring helicopters overhead. Is that what keeps me awake? Or is it the anxiety about what might happen soon?... Should we thank God for the news from the IDF about *"easing restrictions?"* Sometimes, I wonder whether this might not be a kind of coded signal for soldiers to dispense with all "restrictions" when *"teaching a lesson"* to Palestinian workers all too eager to return home for prayer and fast breaking...

Friday, 7 November – “Hunting for birds can kill you...”

Just finished watching international news on Euronews, BBC World News, CNN. No mention of the following “insignificant incident” reported instead by BBC Internet News:

“10-year-old boy killed in Gaza: A Palestinian boy... Mahmoud al-Kayed, 10, died after being hit by shrapnel from Israeli tank fire as he hunted for birds (emphasis mine) in north Gaza. Witness Nimr As-Ous, 22, was picking olives in a nearby grove on Friday morning when he heard the gunfire. ‘I started to run when I heard the firing. Mahmoud and his friends were trying to catch birds with a net when they were hit by shrapnel.’ The Israeli army said they had opened fire on suspicious figures (emphasis mine) spotted close to the border crossing point, which is banned to Palestinians. “They appeared to be carrying wires and other pieces of equipment for an explosive device and were thought to be planting a bomb near the community,” a military source said.

How “explosive” can a “bird net” in a child’s hands be?

Monday, November 10 – “What if this were your little girl?”

2:00 PM - Just had a quick look at today’s papers. Our selection, though limited, spreads across the political spectrum: Jerusalem Post (Israeli mainline conservative right wing); Haaretz (Israeli liberal centre left); The Jerusalem Times (independent Palestinian weekly); International Herald Tribune (who owns it?). The Tribune carries the photo of a smiling middle-aged woman carrying a young olive tree. The caption reads: *“Charlotte Knobloch, leader of the Jewish community in Bavaria, carrying an olive tree on Sunday [anniversary of Kristallnacht] that was to be planted on the site of a new Jewish center and Synagogue.”*

Pity that just two days ago Settlers near Nablus (West Bank) cut down overnight more than 500 mature olive trees owned by Palestinian farmers, and completely destroyed the harvest of olives ready to be bagged!...

Watching the profoundly shocking documentary “Gaza Strip”, a few days back, I was again reminded that olive trees represent a lot more than a source of income. The concluding lamentation is voiced by a young Palestinian teenager: *“Why do they kill our trees, why do they kill the trees of life, the trees of peace?...”* They are the most powerful symbol of one’s identity rooted in land and ancestors; a symbol at once of survival and prosperity, of a blessed long life and a well deserved peace. Destroying an olive tree is like saying: *“you do not belong here; you do not exist...”*

Is this another *“lesson to be learned?”* What better teachers that some fanatical Israeli Settlers illegally occupying other people’s land!

7:30 PM - After supper, as usual, I find myself with other students and staff sitting around in the “Bethlehem Room” (so called because of the breathtaking view of Bethlehem from the adjacent balcony), exchanging views and impressions on the day while sipping our coffees and teas. Tonight, I notice that Sharon is keeping very quiet (rather unusual for her!) and looking rather forlorn... I just let her be. Later, when most people have retired, I ask her what is the matter. What follows is her own brief summary of the harrowing story she shared with me:

“Today I went into Bethlehem to do some business at a bank. I cashed a fairly large check and so, on my return I decided to walk through the checkpoint rather than walking up the hill behind Tantur. At the checkpoint, the soldiers motioned for me to walk through the walkway instead of walking through with the cars as I usually do. So I joined the line of Palestinians waiting to pass from the West Bank to Jerusalem.

There were a mother, with her 4 or 5 year old daughter and the little girl’s grandmother in front of me. They were trying to go to Jerusalem so they could take the little girl to the hospital. The mother showed the soldier some papers, though clearly they were not the necessary pass. The soldiers wouldn’t let them through. The mother and grandmother wouldn’t give up easily, however. First they explained, then argued, and finally begged to be allowed to go through. They had been waiting for 4 months, they said, for an appointment for the little girl at a Jerusalem hospital and were phoned today and told there was an opening and they should come. But, of course, they didn’t have time to get permission.

The soldier was unmovable. With a smile on his face, that spoke to me of, perhaps, his discomfort or shame, he continued to explain to her that he “could do nothing.” She begged, finally, in tears,



People detained for hours in freezing cold until after dark on a Ramadan Friday

asking him, "What if this were your little girl? What would you do? Please let us through." Still smiling he lifted his hands in helplessness and repeated, "There's nothing I can do."

And so, the three turned around and walked back by me and towards Bethlehem, their prison and perhaps their death house.

The U.S. passport I was holding burned my hands as I watched.

I imagined tearing it into four pieces and handing it to the soldiers as I so easily passed through the checkpoint, without even having to speak one word, and returned to Tantur."

Wednesday, 12 November – "My greatest ambition..."

I wish you had an opportunity to watch this delightfully poignant docudrama I enjoyed tonight at the International Centre in Bethlehem. Entitled "Ford Transit", it is a masterful account of a day in the life of a Palestinian taxi driver that seems to turn life into fiction and fiction becomes more real than life.

His greatest ambition: "to be able to drive for one hour without having to negotiate a checkpoint..."

His unbounded belief in the ability of his people to survive: "Palestinians are like ants: they always find a way around an obstacle (read checkpoint)."

After the show, we had a lively conversation with the Palestinian film director Hany Abu Asaad. A memorable line of his: "In an occupied situation, trying to live a normal life is turned into a crime..."

Is that, again, another "lesson" that soldiers try to teach every day at checkpoints around the country?...

Giovanni

Tantur Ecumenical Institute
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Useful websites links/articles on Middle East issues on the Pax Christi website
www.paxchristi.org.uk - look in Middle East section