

## STUDY TOUR TO PALESTINE/ISRAEL JANUARY 2007

If anyone had told me on 13 November 2006 that I'd be visiting Palestine and Israel early in the New Year I would very likely have laughed and said, 'Now pull the other one.' However, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January I was having my first taste of Israeli security at Hong Kong Airport.

Primarily, the trip confirmed my expectations that what I'd been reading about and hearing about for the past two or three years was entirely correct. The Palestinian people are suffering the consequences of 40 years of Israeli military occupation. The longest such occupation in modern history.

Various people have asked me whether we visited Israel or whether we visited Palestine, or the West Bank. My response has been that it is all Israel: the Israeli military and political establishment effectively occupy the whole of the land; they are in control and it is clear that they want the whole of the land to themselves. The two Jewish-American 'settlers' we met at the Efram settlement; which sprawls over the hillside, just across the valley from the Bethlehem Hotel, made the telling point that 'God gave them the land.' That was the end of our lesson.

Our brief visit to this troubled land provided a taste of what it is like to be a Palestinian, subjected 24 hours a day to the unpredictable actions and demands of young, and always armed, IDF troops. There can be no argument but that the Israelis are practising and rigidly enforcing a system of apartheid. This was brought home to us one morning at the second Bethlehem checkpoint, when our travel agent, Rafat Shamali, was ordered off the bus and made to walk through the security 'terminal' complex. In a display of solidarity (at Kerry Nettle's suggestion), and to the consternation of the IDF soldiers, we all got off our bus and followed Rafat through

the security maze. This demeaning process is endured night and morning by Palestinians needing to make their way to Jerusalem and return.

We were told that there are some 540 roadblocks operating in the West Bank. In addition, the IDF also use 'flying checkpoints,' that is a system of mobile roadblocks to further harass Palestinians. In Hebron we were held at a checkpoint between two Palestinian enclaves by the IDF for about 40 minutes. As a result we were forced to abandon a planned meeting in order to make our next appointment. Approaching a T-junction in the market area a troop of IDF soldiers in combat formation suddenly appeared on our right. We followed as they swept on, in an obvious display of military arrogance, calculated to drive home the message of their superiority to all non-Israelis.

On another occasion we were held at a checkpoint for 50 minutes when Rafat was refused entry on a technicality over his pass. So we turned around and detoured back to Bethlehem the long way round. The Israelis are paranoid about security, to the point of absurdity. We were joined for part of our tour by a young student from Sydney University, Rawan Abdul-Nabi. Because Rawan spent six hours with an aunt in Syria on her way to Israel, she was held for seven hours at Ben Gurion Airport. No food, no water, no access to a toilet, until she demanded it and a glass of water, and of course, lengthy and repeated questioning. Perhaps fortunately, Rawan had her mobile phone and talked to her increasingly worried mother in Sydney.

However, life is much harder for local Palestinians. We visited the Aida refugee 'camp' in Bethlehem; about ten minutes walk from our hotel, and to our uninformed eyes much like any other run-down part of town.. Salah Ajamin, manager of the Lajee centre, took us up onto the roof of a nearby building which provided an exceptional view of the 'Separation Wall' in this area. We could see clearly how the Israelis alter

the course of the wall, wherever they please, to take in more Palestinian land for 'security' reasons.

I later met the occupants of the building, who keep the door to the roof locked, because they fear entry by the IDF. Three years ago Israeli soldiers came over the wall; which is only about 15 metres away, forced their way in and grabbed the then 17 year old son; allegedly for throwing a home-made 'bomb.' (I understand this is a firework in a paper bag, called a 'goh.') The lad denied the offence and when his father attempted to intervene he was knocked to the ground. The last time his parents saw their eldest son was at his trial before a military tribunal three years ago, when he was sentenced to six years gaol. They have no visiting rights.

Seven months ago their second son was arrested by the IDF. He was imprisoned for six months under the Israeli system of 'administrative security.' There is no right of appeal. At the end of six months the military prosecutor simply asks the tribunal to extend the sentence for another six months, and so on.

Fortunately, we were privileged to meet other Israelis who are appalled at the treatment meted out by their fellow Jews on the long-suffering Palestinians, and are actively engaged in counter measures. A young American, Jimmy Johnson, is a leading member of The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and displays great expertise, enthusiasm and dedication in his support of justice for Palestinians. This commendable organisation also produces booklets documenting the range of Israeli actions against the Palestinian people. We also met the remarkable Suzan Lawrence of Mahsom (Checkpoint) Watch, who spends much of her time intervening on behalf of Palestinians who have fallen foul of the IDF at checkpoints. One can only hope that the numbers of those supporting justice for the Palestinians will continue to

grow and that sooner rather than later a majority of the Israeli people will demand change from their leaders.

On a lighter note, my own encounter with Israeli security at Ben Gurion on the way home, only lasted for three quarters of an hour. I was unaware then that Sandra Kanck, who went through two or three hours ahead of me was held for one and a half hours. We excited attention because of the pro-Palestinian material we were carrying. On searching through the papers in my bag for the second time the young security minion pulled out a booklet and went off to a supervisor with his spoils. The supervisor hurried over, waved the offending booklet under my nose and proclaimed, 'This stays in Israel.' I could hardly object! This is a copy of the same publication Bassam gave me back in Adelaide, its title is, *Suspected Citizens: Racial Profiling against Arab Passengers by Israeli Airports and Airlines*. So much for Israeli security.

My last problem, however, was not with Israeli security, but with Her Majesty's Custom Service at Adelaide Airport. I completely forgot there was a lonely mandarine in my backpack and almost scored a \$220 fine!

Peter Strawhan

Talk presented at AFOP AGM Friday 2 March 2007