

Desperate situation calls for desperate solutions
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The checkpoints aren't keeping suicide bombers out of Israel, so a new method of defense is being tried. Ordinary citizens are being trained to disarm suicide bombers, and the process is interesting.

First they must learn to spot someone who might have a bomb on his or her body. Two persons must then coordinate the disarming because the main thing is to keep the bomber's fingers off the detonator. Each of the defenders rushes at the suspect and grabs an arm, at the same time throwing the suspect to the ground. If there is a bomb, the defenders are taught to break the suspect's arms and, if he continues to struggle, to bite through the carotid artery in the throat.

Checkpoints

Checkpoints might be anywhere but are usually at entrances to the West Bank and to the Gaza Strip. The soldiers doing the processing are usually young, probably 18 or 19, and are given tremendous discretionary powers. They carry U.S. M-16 rifles, wear armored vests and are obviously a bit jumpy. The danger to them is real, and they are often targets of choice.

As a psychologist, I was traveling with a five-member team from MU's International Center for Psychosocial Trauma to run training programs for mental health workers in Palestine.

We did not find the soldiers warm and friendly; instead there were often questions about whether we should be allowed to pass.

On the road from Jerusalem to Ramallah, the team put me in the front seat of the Red Cross van on the premise that I'm an older male, look very American and non-threatening. We were told that being Americans carries no weight and were instructed to get our papers out to prove we had a right to enter the area. A letter from the International Red Cross with our names and passport numbers finally proved to be the key that allowed us to pass.

The group of Palestinians from Gaza we had trained in Cairo in August were kept waiting outside the checkpoint for four days and had to sleep on the ground.

At the checkpoint for getting into the Gaza Strip we had to transfer our baggage and ourselves to a different van. Although we were put through the process as VIPs, it took considerable time to check us out. Our electronic equipment used for instantaneous translations arrived at our program late because of the care taken in making sure it wouldn't or couldn't be used to create weapons.

One of the young Israeli soldiers we met at that checkpoint had been raised in Canada and said he didn't approve of what either side was doing.

Anticipatory eradication

One of my informants from the Red Crescent - similar to the Red Cross - said the Israelis attack anyplace their intelligence tells them might be making weapons or bombs that Palestinian terrorists might use. They will also attack any place suspected of hiding terrorists. The usual procedure is for Apache helicopters to shoot rockets at the main target while a group of up to 30 tanks patrols the streets shooting machine guns.

How do the Israelis know where to attack? My informants said Palestinians have many small workshops where handicrafts are made. The Israelis will decide that one of them is producing weapons. They usually warn the occupants that the building is about to be destroyed so they have time to escape, but not to rescue any belongings or tools.

One of my informants said that even when there is no possibility they can manufacture any kind of weapon, the small factories might be bombed as a way to ruin the economy of Palestine. This last claim is a common one among Palestinians who see the Israeli incursions into their cities as a form of terrorism and a way to destroy the infrastructure.

The night before we arrived in Gaza, the building next to our hotel had been hit with rockets. The Israelis are obviously getting quite good at containing the damage from their attacks since the walls of the building were still standing and there was little damage to surrounding buildings. In front of our hotel were a Red Cross vehicle and a number of cars that had been pretty badly shot up with machine guns.

Mutual aggression

On the bluff overlooking the Red Crescent office building in Ramallah is an Israeli settlement. The groups exchange sniper fire regularly. The Palestinians consider that it is their territory being taken over by the Israelis.

In response, Palestinian freedom fighters come into the area and shoot at the settlement. There is usually an immediate response of machine-gun fire from the settlement. In the Red Crescent parking lot were a number of ambulances that had windshields full of bullet holes. There were also three that had been destroyed by Israeli tanks in a retaliatory raid.

Even if the settlers start the exchange of gunfire, the Israeli army also starts shooting. This exchange might go on for three hours. Innocent people have been killed in their homes. Israelis have taken most of the guns out of Ramallah, and the checkpoints have prevented more guns from getting in. Jennifer Jordan, a Canadian who works with Red Crescent, said, "The first year and a half I was here, the exchange of gunfire was a daily occurrence."

At any one time, a large number of Palestinian men 15 and older are in jail, and they rotate in and out as new arrests are made. They might be kept a few days, a few weeks and some a few months.

While we were in Palestine, a number of soldiers were killed at an Israeli settlement in Hebron. Although a number of Palestinians had been arrested, everyone was waiting for Israel military retaliation that could be severe.

Getting in and out of Israel

The processing of passengers at El Al in Chicago seemed to go on forever. Each member of our team was interviewed and our luggage checked multiple times. I had to explain why I was carrying two cameras.

Jeff Hoelscher, a public relations specialist from the MU Medical School and University Hospital, who had professional equipment, was investigated much more intensely. Our frequent question during the visit, "Where's Jeff?" was often answered by, "He's in holding, being checked again."

Upon leaving Israel, our luggage was not only X-rayed but also searched by hand and with chemicals, and we were each taken into a room for a close body check. Because of his insistence on his film being hand-checked and his general attitude, Jeff was told by the inspector not to come back to Israel.

Although all of these precautions make El Al one of the safest airlines, the cost in manpower and money is tremendous. The countrywide security operations have been a drain on the economy that might not be maintainable. It was apparent that both sides are suffering in multiple ways from the present conflict.