

Palestinians under siege

Israel says it must defend itself from attacks.

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Yasser Arafat wanted to say thanks.

During a trip to Ramallah in November, members of the University of Missouri-Columbia's International Center for Psychosocial Trauma were invited to meet with the Palestinian leader in his crumbling compound.

Arafat said he had heard about our program to train mental health workers to treat traumatized children and wanted to personally express his appreciation for our efforts. He also took the opportunity to criticize Israel's ongoing assault on Palestinians.

Israeli troops took over Ramallah and most other areas of the West Bank several months ago in an attempt to halt suicide bombings and other attacks targeting Israelis. Since Israeli-Palestinian violence broke out in September 2000, more than 1,950 people have been killed on the Palestinian side, while at least 680 on the Israeli side have died, according to the Associated Press.

When we visited, much of the Palestinian Authority's compound had been reduced to rubble by Israeli forces. Led by MU Professor Arshad Husain, our team drove into an area that had been recently cleared of debris. Our guide said that whenever Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon got upset, he would send in tanks and helicopters to destroy another part of the compound.

Some 300 vehicles that had been destroyed by the Israeli military surrounded the compound. The wrecked autos were stacked on top of one another to fortify the perimeter. In Arabic, signs affixed to some of the cars said, "We still have something to talk about. Yasser Arafat."

Dirt was piled up around the remaining buildings along with assorted rubble and barbed wire. Behind mounds of sandbags, Arafat's guards were equipped with Uzis and AK47s, providing little protection from tanks and helicopters.

It seemed obvious that the Israelis could take Arafat out whenever they wanted to, were it not for international pressure. Essentially under house arrest, the Palestinian leader cannot meet with his Cabinet because of travel restrictions. Arafat's remaining staff members sleep on the floor in cramped quarters.

The guards led us through narrow halls and up a staircase to the floor where Arafat lives in virtual in-house arrest. After a brief wait, we were led into a long room with a table for 18, where Arafat was seated at one end behind a stack of papers. He was in the costume in which he is usually photographed, an old army uniform and the black and white headdress.

He greeted each of us individually with a handshake, hug or kiss on the cheek. His grip was soft, and he came across as a polite, soft-spoken person with a direct gaze. He hardly fit my image of a former terrorist and Nobel winner.

Arafat said he has been troubled by the recent occupation of Palestinian settlements in Hebron and by Israel's unwillingness to adhere to peace agreements. He was distressed that developers of new Israeli settlements are bulldozing the Palestinian villagers' olive trees. He pointed out that the Israelis have taken control of the aquifers that are so important to Palestinian farmers and are now selling the water back to them.

Westerners should be aware, Arafat added, that the Christian Palestinians are just as mistreated as the Muslims. "Jerusalem is the world's most holy city," he said. "All religions should be allowed access."

The Palestinian leader had a slight tremor but did not look to be in as poor condition as recent media reports have suggested.

As we asked questions, Arafat seemed to be a resilient survivor. He said he believes in Palestine and Palestinians and he expects them to survive. His contention that Israel is trying to destroy the infrastructure of Palestine to force his people out was supported by a number of other people I interviewed.

The pilot

One evening, members of our team had hoped to walk on the Mediterranean beach that was a few blocks from our hotel in Gaza. Hotel security told us that Israeli tanks were in that area and that it would not be safe. Instead of the walk, three of us were driven to a beachfront hotel. For our safety, a Palestinian security man accompanied us. When we asked about an explosion earlier in the evening, he said it was from a rocket fired from a helicopter in a village 10 kilometers away.

As we sat sipping tea and looking out at the dark sea, our protector told us he had been a captain for a small commercial airline that the Palestinians had started. The airline had four commuter planes for flying passengers around the gulf area. He said that Israelis considered the airline a threat to their security and destroyed the planes.

He said the lights we saw offshore were on Palestinian fishing boats that were required to stay close to shore. This means that Palestinians have to buy fish from Israel because close-in fishing was not sufficient for their needs.

The Lutherans

At breakfast in Jerusalem, I met two men from the International Solidarity Movement. They were part of a team protesting Israeli occupation of Palestinian settlements. Most members of the international team were from the Lutheran Church, and some were ministers. These volunteers stay as guests in Palestinian towns that are under attack and

act as human shields. Robert Smith, a team member from St. Paul, Minn., said they hoped that their actions would attract attention to the conflict.

In several areas, bulldozers were destroying olive trees that villagers depend on to make ends meet. The team hoped to stop some of the destruction and was picking olives with the villagers as a way of protecting them. They had previously formed a human chain to protect the grove from the bulldozers, which backed off. The next day troops with tear gas arrested 10 group members, including three Americans.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops destroyed 200 greenhouses, 15,000 olive trees and 50,000 other trees. Seven groundwater wells were taken over as was the livestock pasture, Smith said.

"The Israelis are building a security wall between Palestine and Israel," he said. "We also went to protest this wall because it is being built six kilometers within the green line. The wall is going to be three times as long and twice as high as the Berlin wall."

The Red Crescent director

The local director of the Red Crescent Society reported that Israelis have done everything they can to ruin the self-esteem of Palestinians. "They make us wait or turn us away from checkpoints. We are treated as non-persons. If we leave the country for a year, we lose not only our citizenship but all of our property as well. Israel would like to see the land vacated.

"We are a hindrance to them."

He said thousands of new settlers come to Israel each year and, with the financial support of the United States, are building large housing complexes. He is concerned about the settlements' encroachment into what he views as Palestinian territory.

He sounded like the Palestinian leader in other ways, too. One of the comparisons often made was that the Israelis were doing to the Palestinians what the Germans had done to them. Like others in Palestine, he believed the Jews had considerable world power and felt that their long-term goal was world domination.

Mohamad El-Tawil, a Canadian surgeon whose relatives live in Gaza, was traveling with us. He summed up the sentiments of his kin.

"We have achieved a balance of terror, but not a balance of power," he said. "Terror only fathers terror. The threat of terrorism is intended to hold the Israelis in check and to slow the pace at which they take over our land, our homes and our way of supporting ourselves. Men here in Gaza who have jobs work with bombs strapped to their bodies so that if there is an Israeli attack they can sacrifice themselves at great cost to the Israelis."

A Red Cross worker from England who had been working in Gaza for the last year said, "I don't understand what is going on here. The situation makes no sense to me."