

Dangerous mission

MU team risks safety to help Palestinians.

By WAYNE ANDERSON Special to the Tribune

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We had been warned that security in Israel was tight because of the very real threat of suicide bombers and other terrorist attacks. It is one of those things you must experience before you can appreciate it. Our five-person team from the University of Missouri-Columbia's International Center for Psychosocial Trauma did just that while traveling in Israel to conduct training programs for mental-health workers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The first sign that moving about Israel would be tense occurred at passport control, when a staff member wanted to make sure we knew that we were putting ourselves in harm's way. "It's dangerous here in Israel," she said. "Are you sure you want to enter?" When we assured her we did, she asked us to have a seat and passed our forms and passports to a security agent.

Our leader, MU child psychiatrist Arshad Husain, and I were then subjected to interrogations in which we were asked to explain our program and why it was necessary for us to enter the Palestinian zone. Husain had a briefcase full of supporting paperwork from a variety of sources, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, to establish our legitimacy. Our "Hope for the Children" brochure seemed to carry some weight, too, because it had photographs of our team members working with children around the world.

After 90 minutes and calls to higher-ranking bureaucrats, the passport staff decided that we would be allowed to go to the West Bank to conduct our training program. The team consisted of MU education Professor Venetta Whitaker, public relations specialist Jeffrey Hoelscher, psychologist Barbara Bauer and me.

The Red Crescent Society of Qatar, a sister organization of the Red Cross, provided financial support for the training program. Mohamad El-Tawil, a Canadian surgeon, served as our host and introduced us at the different locations.

Getting around

The highways in Israel were excellent. In Palestinian areas, they are in poor condition, in some places torn up by tank treads and in others just the victim of neglect. You could tell Israel was a developed country; the cars were new models with a fair number of BMWs and Mercedes. I saw only one older car that looked as if it had been damaged. In Palestinian areas, however, there were many older cars and body damage seemed to be a natural condition.

In Israel, motorists are fined for not using seat belts, talking on cell phones and speeding. Palestinian authorities are much looser. You don't have to use seat belts, can talk on the cell phone and speed.

Edgy young soldiers in protective vests manned the Israeli checkpoints. Given the real possibility that they could be attacked at any time, it seemed reasonable that they would be edgy. They carefully examine all credentials and have the power to keep you waiting for as long as it takes to determine you are not a security threat. We were informed that our American citizenship afforded us special consideration.

Later, when we took a tour of Jerusalem, it was apparent that the tourist business has all but disappeared. Our guide said his work was once a great job, but now he has a hard time making ends meet.

The Scandinavians

During our first morning in Jerusalem, I met a group of Swedes from the Swedish Rescue Services Agency. They were staying at our hotel while they distributed food in the West Bank. Unemployment is high in the Palestinian areas and making sure that residents get enough food is a challenge, they said. A number of nations have combined their resources to provide supplies that these Swedes distribute. Jennifer Jordan, one of our hosts, said the food trucks are not allowed into the West Bank whenever the Israelis impose a curfew. We were there during Ramadan, a time when Muslims fast during the day. The curfew had been lifted in most areas.

Because of the Israelis' well-founded fear of weapons and bombs being smuggled into the country, the Swedes said they had more trouble getting out of areas than getting in. They come to the Mideast in teams of 12 to 14 members.

We also met a group of Norwegian medical professionals who were there training paramedics. Several were also working as ambulance drivers. Because of the difficulty of getting past checkpoints, the Red Crescent uses some foreign nationals as drivers since they seem to get past checkpoints more easily.

The training program.

Given their personal losses and the constant stress of living in a virtual war zone, Palestinian children are in great need of counseling. Our job was to train Palestinian mental health workers who are tasked with helping the smallest victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two more trips to work with the Palestinians are in the planning stages.

This time, our team did a four-day training program with 20 mental-health workers in Ramallah, a West Bank town about 15 miles north of Jerusalem, and four days with 30 workers in the Gaza Strip. It was technically the best program we have done. Despite the many limitations under which Palestinians work, they have excellent electronic equipment. Students and faculty were equipped with small portable receivers and earpieces. The translators did instantaneous translations, talking as we talked. It is always a mystery to me how they can do this accurately. This not only saved time, but we also

found that their translations were exceptionally accurate. This is not always the case in some countries where the team has worked.

Many of the mental-health workers in Ramallah have had limited training in psychology and social work. Our material was a real advance for them. We have had occasional problems with getting men to practice new skills, due to their fear of looking incompetent. That was not the case on this trip as the males entered fully into the skill-building exercises.

In Gaza, our students were concerned because they were separated from their families. When curfews are imposed, they never know how long they will be kept away from home. On the other hand, the occasional sounds of bombs and gunfire did not seem particularly alarming to them.

A refugee camp

One of our electronic technicians accompanied Jennifer Jordan and our team on a tour of the largest refugee camp in Ramallah. The camp was started in 1948 with 16,000 people and was little more than an open field with tents. Now home to 26,000 people, it resembles a small city with regular buildings and a sewage system built by the people. It has water and electricity when the Israelis don't turn them off. Since the uprising began, there has been little work for the refugees. They rely on the good will of foreigners for most of their necessities.

We visited the community recreation center for children and saw 30 little boys practicing tae kwon do. The facilities for the large number of children in the camp seemed very limited. The center also has a dozen computers to teach them computer theory. They are not hooked up to the Internet, because they can't pay for ongoing fees. Israeli soldiers had previously broken into the center, busting out windows and doors and smashing the TV, our hosts said. They arrested a number of the boys and held them for five days. Israeli army officials have called the facility a terrorist breeding ground.

Walls in the camp are covered with graffiti. Some of the street art pleads for the end of the Israeli occupation, while some of it honors Palestinians who have been killed, either by the Israelis or in suicide attacks. I didn't see the hopelessness that I expected. People are still trying to keep things nice and to be pleasant to strangers.

Adventure in Gaza

The Center of Preventive Security building, which was adjacent to our hotel, had been bombed by the Israelis the night before we arrived in Gaza. Israeli tanks also shot up cars and an ambulance that had been sitting in front of our hotel. The second night there we were awakened at 1 a.m. and told that the Israeli army had started moving their tanks into the area. We were taken to a nearby hospital that was less likely to be shelled by the Israeli army.

A bomb or shell blasts woke me up at midnight the following day. We had been told to have all of our bags packed in case we had to leave quickly. The Red Crescent was keeping track of the danger level and was prepared to move us out if tanks moved into the area. There was some fear that if more bombs were dropped on the building next door it could cause the walls in our hotel to collapse.

We waited in the lobby for an hour before people could return to their rooms. I had called my wife and assured her I was safe. But shells were pounding the area as we talked at 12:05 a.m. The Israeli army's targets are hard to predict, but they normally make only one attack per night. Once the Palestinians and visiting foreigners determine that the Israelis were committed elsewhere, they went back to bed.

Husain, our team leader, did a live TV program on Palestinian TV at 2 a.m. one day, fielding questions from around the world. The following night, Bauer and I did the hour-long program. The interviewer had good questions, but when he opened the phones, callers didn't have questions. They mostly wanted to convince us what a terrible situation they are in as an occupied territory - the constant killings, the bombing of buildings and the settlements being built on what they see as their territory. It was apparent they felt forgotten by the rest of the world.

The callers pointed out that the Israelis have tanks, F-16s and Apache helicopters. Palestinians we talked to said they feel that all they have is their blood. One man who called had to stop to see how close the tanks were before he called back later to continue his complaints about the situation.

The show is very popular here and is sent by satellite around the world. Bauer and I had a caller from the United States and one from Britain. When I got back to bed I was awakened several times by the sound of machine-gun fire. For some reason I didn't have trouble falling back to sleep.