

Ramallah letter:

I.T.'s tragedy*

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It took me some time to collect the bits and pieces of this story. My sources are I.T.'s husband, a doctor, and three of her neighbors and friends. I.T.'s story shows how a human being can be killed twice, once psychologically and once physically. The tragedy developed like this:

I.T. is a married woman with three young daughters: One is five and a half years old, the second is three and a half, and the baby is six months old. I.T. and her husband originally came from Nablus. After they married eight years ago, they moved to Ramallah, where they have no family except a married sister-in-law with no children, who lives in downtown Ramallah. I.T. received a degree in pharmacology and is known as a quiet and intelligent woman. She took many courses in French and Hebrew and she speaks very good English. Her husband studied in England for thirteen years to become an optician and lens expert. He operates a very successful business. I.T. owns her own pharmacy, which she runs with two assistants who come from nearby villages.

A few weeks before the Israeli army reoccupied Ramallah on March 29, 2002, I.T. was obliged to liquidate her pharmacy. Her assistants were besieged in their villages by the Israeli army and could not come to work. In addition, the pharmacy was continually hit by Israeli fire from the near-

by Psagot settlement, because it was located near a post for the Palestinian national guard. Its window glass was shattered and it became dangerous to stay in it. I.T. could not run the pharmacy by herself, as she had three little girls who needed her attention. Therefore, she shut it down.

Two days after the Israeli army reoccupied Ramallah, loud speakers ordered all men from age fifteen to 55 to turn themselves in to the Israeli army. After the third announcement, I.T.'s husband gave himself up, fearing that the soldiers would come to his house and destroy it, as they had done to other houses. Around a thousand men gathered in Moughtaribiin school. After staying two days in the cold rain, they were taken to Ofra settlement, just north east of Ramallah. Once there, no one knew where they were and how they could be contacted. I.T. was left alone with her three children. She received phone calls from friends and relatives. When the next door neighbor asked if she needed anything, she always said no. I.T.'s closest neighbor couldn't visit her, because snipers were on top of the buildings that surrounded them.

After four days, the curfew was lifted for the first time. O. M., I.T.'s closest neighbor, visited her and asked her daugh-

ter to stay with I.T.'s children to enable I.T. to go out and shop for her family. O.M. noticed that the girls were neglected and hungry. I.T. complained that they took her husband because they wanted to separate them. In an attempt to comfort her, O.M. told her that the men would be released soon. She asked when, so O.M. said: "Maybe after an hour or so." I.T. dashed to change her clothes and prepare her children to meet their father. After some time, she became nervous and blamed O.M. for lying to her. O.M. was surprised, but realized that I.T. was not OK.

O.M. left I.T.'s house because she had to get home before the curfew was reimposed, but asked the downstairs neighbor to host I.T. in her apartment. She did, but no one could sleep that night as I.T. kept closing all the windows, fearing that 'snipers' would shoot her. She accused her neighbor of collaborating with the Israeli army to assassinate her and her family. It seems that I.T. had had a nervous breakdown.

The next morning O.M. risked her life and ran quickly to see I.T. and comfort her. She left when I.T. seemed calm. That night, I.T. started to throw things out the window and ran away from her house with her three children barefoot, claiming that the Israelis wanted to blow up the building.

O.M. took her to her house and, after some time, went to sleep, as it was already 2 a.m. After half an hour, her husband shouted: "She's burning down the house!" I.T. was spilling kerosene on the beds and covers, saying: "I will demolish the temple over my head and over theirs, too." She threw herself on top of her baby; it took O.M. and her husband awhile to rescue the baby. They tried to calm her down until 7 a.m., when she opened the door and ran out holding her baby, with the two others clinging to her dress.

She dashed into the street, cursing Jews and Arabs. She reached a military checkpoint where some people said she threw stones at the soldiers. She entered the Red Crescent hospital, located nearby, followed by soldiers. A doctor checked her and realized that she was hysterical, suffering from a nervous breakdown. He explained her situation to the soldiers and asked them to inform their colleagues so that they would not shoot at her. The doctor called her relatives in Nablus and her sister-in-law in Ramallah, but no one could come to her aid as they were all under curfew.

I.T. then left her children at that hospital and ran to Ramallah hospital, where she was kept for a while and given a shot to calm her down. But she ran back to the Red Crescent hospital to find her children. An ambulance took them all back to their house, where she became very violent. O. M. asked the next door neighbor to stay with her that night, but it was impossible for anyone to get even a minute of sleep. She was sensitive to the colors blue, red, and black, imagining that electronic rays were going to blow up the house. O.M. asked the Red Cross

and Red Crescent to bring her sister-in-law to stay with her, but they refused, saying that the curfew was too tight and they were not allowed to move in the streets.

The following day, I.T. screamed for her husband and then took her eldest daughter and ran away again. This time she went to President Arafat's compound to ask him to help her get her husband out of detention. The compound was besieged by Israeli tanks and soldiers. They stopped her, beat her severely, and broke her hand. The soldiers called an ambulance from the Ramallah hospital to take her away. In the hospital I.T. called O.M., telling her that she had woken up feeling pain everywhere, with a broken hand and red marks all over her body, but she didn't know why or how she had been injured. O.M. talked to I.T.'s oldest daughter, who told her: "The army beat my mom and I was screaming." The hospital managed to send an ambulance to get her sister-in-law and drove them all to I.T.'s house at 7 p.m. I.T. became worse and her sister-in-law was afraid. At 6 a.m. she called O.M., complaining that I.T. was violent and the girls were screaming.

I.T. ran away again, holding a big stone in her hand, with which she smashed her car, saying: "They put cameras inside it to blow up." Her neighbors took the stone from her hand, but she ran away again to the president's compound to get help finding her husband. When I.T. arrived at the compound, she was 'received' by six bullets that hit both her legs. Later, a female Israeli doctor phoned O.M., telling her that I.T. was in Hadassah hospital in Ein Karem (West Jerusalem). The doctor wanted some background information about her. As O.M. did not understand English, she asked the doctor to find someone who could speak to her in Arabic. The doctor did not call again, as she apparently did not find anyone who could talk to O.M. I.T. later called O.M., telling her that her two legs were in casts and she did not know how she reached the hospital. The girls were left with their aunt. O.M. and the aunt decided to put the baby on powdered milk, since I.T. was not there to breastfeed her.

I.T.'s husband was released after ten days, without any charges filed against him. But he found his family at risk. He said that I.T. had suffered from a slight depression and had been treated once by a specialist. But she had never been in such a desperate condition. "Did you visit her" at Hadassah, O.M. asked him. "Are you joking? First, we are under curfew. Second, how can we reach West Jerusalem, where the hospital is located? I need permission to go there and who will give that to me now," he responded. He contacted Physicians Without Borders and other humanitarian organizations to enable him to visit his wife. "I just need to show her that I am fine in order to comfort her; she must be now in need of my presence beside her."

* Names have been changed to insure privacy.