

And They Call This Peace!

Monica Tarazi

Live testimony from occupied Jerusalem: "I wrote this last night when I got home from Jerusalem. It is neither clever nor analytical. But it's what I saw. And what I saw was heartbreaking." Monica Tarazi

Today, I went to Jerusalem. It was devastating. I was with a group of Palestinians from Haifa and its surrounding area. We were there for a conference which was canceled because of the 'events' as the conference organizers put it with ironic understatement. So with little else to do given the general strike that shut Ramallah down completely, and wanting to do something practical to help, we decided to venture into Jerusalem and do just about the only thing you can do here without risking your life when there are demonstrations against the occupation outside every refugee camp and at every checkpoint. We went to the Makassed hospital in East Jerusalem to donate blood.

The drive from Ramallah to the Makassed hospital in Jerusalem should take around half an hour. Just over an hour after leaving Ramallah, and having driven through settlement after settlement (because the only roads the Israelis left open were the settlement roads), we finally got close to the hospital only to be stopped by a row of Israeli soldiers standing in a line blocking the road and facing off with a few dozen Palestinian youths who were gathered around 50 yards away. The soldiers were, as usual, heavily armed. They had about a dozen jeeps and several vans. The Palestinians, again as usual, had only stones. There were burning tires in the road. Every now and then a Palestinian would throw a stone in the direction of the soldiers (who were too far away to actually be hit), and then retreated.

I bumped into L., a German girl I know who lives and works at the Lutheran hospital down the street from the Makassed.

"This has been going on all night," she told me wearily. "Yesterday it took me three hours to get from over there to here because the whole road was blocked." She pointed in the direction of the Makassed, about 150 yards away. She continued, "they (the soldiers) came into the hospital last night and were shooting inside .. several of the boys died in here." she added, by way of explanation. Boys. They're killing boys.

After a few minutes spent gaping in horror, we got back into our bus and cars and turned around. We drove about 20 minutes through the side streets until we finally reached the Makassed. As we drove to the front of the hospital we could hear shooting. The Israeli occupation forces were apparently getting bored just standing there and decided to take things up a notch.

More shots, and an ambulance zoomed past sirens wailing. With her usual impeccable timing, my mother called. I thought about lying about where I was, but realized that she would be able to see through my fib - if not from my voice, then from the gunshots and ambulance sirens. I said I'd call back later.

We were greeted at the hospital by an official looking man who led us up the stairs to the rooms where the injured were being treated. The first man we met had been hit, by a rubber-coated bullet I think, in the head. He looked drowsy and his head was covered in bandages. He was about 25 years old. Someone from our group said a few words of support, and we moved on. In the next room was a man lying with a bandage across his face. He was lucky: only his eye had been blown off. If he had been a few inches to the right, the bullet would probably have entered his brain. In the next room was a young man who had been shot in the hand. The

room after that housed a man who had been shot in the stomach. "He's in a very bad shape," whispered a doctor. Stating the obvious, he added, "it's not good to be shot in the stomach."

Downstairs, the injuries were worse: A 13 year old girl shot in the stomach. A man shot in the head. Another had been shot in the heart - they didn't think he'd last the night. I stopped listening after that. Another room, another patient in agony, another family suffering in silence. And then another. And another. All the while, we could hear the sirens screaming as the ambulances entered the hospital. And we could still hear the shooting.

We went outside to the hospital's Emergency Entrance. There were probably two dozen people there, some in uniform, some not. One man had a megaphone which he was using to give orders to everyone in sight. Everyone seemed to have a cell phone which struck me as being strange until I realized that they were using them to communicate with the ambulances and the various taxis acting as ambulances. "There's one coming! Clear the way! Clear the Street!" ordered the man with the megaphone. "Only doctors can approach the car!" An ambulance roared in. The hospital staff pulled out a young man with bandages around his arm. Someone yelled to alert the man with the megaphone to the arrival of another vehicle. Again Mr. Megaphone repeated his demand for everyone to clear the way and let the ambulance through. And again they did.

This time the 'ambulance' was a white service taxi van, one of many being used to ferry the injured to the hospital. Out came a girl about 14 years old. I guessed she was suffering from tear gas inhalation: she had no visible wounds, was breathless, and was clutching her head. Another ambulance arrived with another young man. Then another. Five ambulances in the 20 minutes we spent there. I couldn't decide whether to be relieved or devastated that everything was so well organized. On the one hand, everyone had his job and knew what to do: it worked like clockwork. On the other, that perfection was tragic when the activity in question is the admission of wounded youths to a hospital.

At that point I had started shaking. Adrenaline, stimulated by horror and rage, was attacking my legs and arms. I felt weak, but strangely energized. My legs shook slightly as I walked. I was selfishly relieved when we were told that the outpouring of donations from the local community meant they had no room for our blood. I figured I needed every

drop of my blood if I was going to stay vertical for the rest of the afternoon.

From the Emergency Entrance we headed to the office of Dr. Khalid, Director of the hospital. Relieved to be able to sit down (I wasn't sure how much longer my legs would hold me), I gratefully accepted the Arabic coffee handed around. I just started to relax, when the shooting started up again, louder this time. So, as sirens wailed outside, and shots rang out from 100 yards away, Dr. Khalid smiled warmly and welcomed us. It's so nice to see 48 Palestinians here in the West Bank, he began, using the term Palestinians use when talking about that part of Palestine lost in 1948. One of the women in our group interrupted him. "We are not the 48 Palestinians. We have always been here. They are the Jews of 48". But then she thanked him and put into words what we were all feeling. "Our hearts", she said, "are with you."

We asked him about the people we had seen and the procedure for dealing with crisis such as this. He told us that yesterday 5 martyrs died at the Makassed. 190 people were injured and needed treatment. 150 were admitted. He told us

that all five were killed by the type of bullets that explode after entering the body, causing maximum damage. "High velocity bullets" he said in English. I wondered if there was a way to say "high velocity bullet" in Arabic or if they always used English to describe them. He told us that the Israelis have no respect for ambulances, that they shoot at them and won't let them help or transport people. Later, someone else told me that yesterday, Palestinians lay injured on the street 50 yards from hospital and the Israelis wouldn't let the ambulances near them.

He then started telling us about the 'Disaster Plan' (again named in

English but explained in Arabic). This plan has been in operation since the first days of the Intifada. Everyone knows his or her role, where they have to be and what they have to do. In times of crisis, all hospital staff have to either be present or on stand-by at a known location so they could be called in if needed. I thought of the 'disaster drills' emergency medical workers simulate in Washington (where I worked with an ambulance service) so we could keep up our skills. They don't need drills here, they have plenty of practice.

When we finished our coffee, we went outside to the bus. While we were milling around waiting for our bus driver to get the bus, and for everyone to say their good-byes, we watched the boys throwing stones and the soldiers lined up

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staring back at them. There was no shooting. Suddenly, all the Palestinians in front of us - about 200 in all - turned and started running towards us. Scared, I looked at the direction of the soldiers. My friend and I grabbed each others hands as we realized that the Israelis soldiers had formed a line and were running towards us, their guns raised, shooting wildly in our direction. Lots of gunfire. The ambulances and other cars fled towards us. Terrified youths, apparently scared of arrest and injury in equal degrees raced past us. Dodging them and the cars, we ducked back into the hospital compound and someone shut the metal gate. My whole body shook in fury and fear. Half of me wanted to run for cover. The other half, the part of me that was furious at the brutality of the soldiers and exploding with rage at the injustice of the situation, wanted to go out and join the *shabab*, to pick up stones and hurl them at the animals shooting at us. Shooting at us because Palestinian youths have the audacity to demand their freedom, the gall to remind the world that they are human beings too with rights and pride, and the desperation to risk everything in the pursuit of justice.

I didn't join them. I cowered behind the gate until it seemed calmer and the youths started to return to the area. We opened the gate and stepped outside the hospital to see what was going on. We had just resumed our places when the soldiers started attacking again. Again, some 200 teenagers turned around towards me and fled. They looked scared; I was terrified. The sounds of the bullets were getting louder and louder as the soldiers came closer. Again we fled into the hospital compound and waited.

A few minutes later, it was calm again. One member of our group sprinted to her car (which was parked right in the line of fire) and I opened the hospital gate for her. The *buaab* (part gatekeeper, part security man), a cheerful looking man in his fifties, smiled at me gratefully and asked in Arabic if I was with the group from 48 Palestine. It was surreal. We stood in the street exchanging greetings. He offered me a cold drink, I explained what I was doing in Palestine. The shooting continued and the youths retreated again. And we stood making small talk.

Finally we moved behind the gate. Our group was, we realize, stranded; our bus was outside but the gunfire was too heavy to reach it, and anyway, our driver was smarter than we were - he was nowhere to be found. So, we did the next best thing to getting the hell out of there. We had lunch. My hands shook as I lifted my fork and used my knife. They were still shaking several hours later when I called my parents to tell them I was OK.

By the time we finished eating, things had calmed down. The youths were still there. So were the soldiers. But the shooting had paused long enough for us to get to the bus. We got on the bus quickly and drove away towards the center of town. In three minutes, we were at the Garden of Gethsemy. Tourists were giggling as they chatted to each

other and marveled at the buildings and the trees. I fought the urge to get out of the bus and shake them. I wanted to shout at them. "Don't you realize that they are KILLING teenagers less than 1km from here? Do you care about nothing but old stones and buildings? How can you go sightseeing when quite literally around the corner, Palestinians are fighting for their lives and for their freedom? You want sights, I'll show you sights. Go to the hospitals. See the sight of a mother crying over her injured child. See a wife praying so that her husband will survive the night. See the Doctors fighting to treat patients with no money, no equipment and no supplies. Watch teenage boys with automatic weapons shoot at teenage boys with stones. But, for God's sake, stop giggling."

Of course, I didn't say that at all. I watched silently from the bus. And listened as the radio announcer read the news: clashes in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron, Gaza, and Jenin. Hundreds injured. over a dozen killed. An ambulance worker shot in the head in Gaza as he tended to a patient who had been shot. A child of 14 shot dead in front of his father as they tried in vain to shelter themselves from the soldiers fire. Another child killed in Gaza. Another in Nablus. A 16 year old from Ramallah. They were firing at demonstrators from helicopters and armored tanks in Gaza. I stopped listening and remembered the clashes I went to in 1998 in Ramallah. I remembered how petrified we all were when the helicopters arrived and started flying low. You can't hide from a helicopter, you see. They can get you wherever you are cowering. And I started remembering the sting of the tear gas used to disperse the crowds, the fact that it stings your eyes, your throat, your lungs and your skin. And then I realized that all day I hadn't seen a single Western journalist. I wondered where they were and cursed them for their absence. And I cursed the soldiers for their brutality. And I cursed the Israeli government for putting them there and and I cursed the whole world for not caring.

Maybe when I have been here longer, I will be able to understand the situation. Maybe one day I will be able to grasp whatever it is in Israel's collective consciousness that enables it to act with such willful disregard for human life. Maybe one day I will decide whether they are convinced by their own pathetic excuses, whether they are motivated by anything besides pure, unadulterated evil. Maybe eventually I will know if Israel honestly thinks that in oppressing and brutalizing a civilian population, a people whose gravest crime is to exist at all, they are serving the interests of peace. Maybe, maybe not.

Right now, as I sit at home writing this down, I'm too tired and physically exhausted, from the dreadful 'low' that inevitably follows an adrenaline 'high'. My head is throbbing and my mind is numb. But I am enjoying the silence. This weekend is the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah. Israel brought in the New Year by killing Palestinians. Start as you mean to continue. And they call this peace.