

# **The Palestine-Israel Conflict from within the West Bank**

**by Elizabeth Saylor**

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Anyone who has spent a substantial period residing in a new country will initially experience a sense of great euphoria upon arrival: New faces, new experiences, new smells, new foods, and new ways of doing things. It's simply phenomenal. Then at some point all the "new" becomes all the "different". The different faces, different experiences, different cultures. Lastly, you crash. It's not new anymore. It's not different. You're stuck with all the unbearable people. The infuriating, absurd ways of doing things. Culture shock. But it's more than that. If the culture actually operated with some degree of "normalcy" and the people weren't so insufferable and the food was remotely edible, then you wouldn't find yourself in such a state of "shock". It's not your fault that you're fed up. It's the damned culture.

By day two of my time in Palestine, the euphoria had already subsided, my curiosity was exhausted, and the whole experience had gotten to me. I'm not sure what I expected when I chose to move to the West Bank in early 2003, a decision prompted by my keen fascination with politics and my attraction to challenge. Much to the chagrin of my family, I was born with wanderlust and an impatience for the next adventure to begin. With Palestine in my sights, I corresponded with Birzeit University, north of Ramallah, and a few humanitarian agencies in the area. As far as I was concerned, I was good to go.

Prior to arrival, my understanding of the situation in the Middle East was limited to daily news and a brief self-study of the region. I assumed I'd mastered the basics – West of the Green Line, you have the Israelis, a tough breed with little tolerance for outsiders. East of the Green Line, you have the Palestinians, an equally tough breed hardened by the intolerance of outsiders. It was as simple as that.

Initially equipped with ignorance, I have since witnessed an extraordinary story of struggle between two of the most intriguing and at the same time, discordant cultures.

I boarded my much anticipated flight to Tel Aviv in January, foolishly awaiting a warm welcome upon arrival. I am, after all, a conservative Republican, a church-going Methodist, and the goddaughter of an Orthodox Jew. And who doesn't love an American?

I was welcomed alright, by the Israeli Defensive Force (IDF). Undressed, detained, and interrogated inexorably. I arrived at Ben Gurion airport alone and naive. But it certainly didn't take long to get adjusted – just do whatever the kid with the self-assured saunter, the ill-fitting fatigues, and that very large AK-47 (the one so haphazardly flung over his shoulder) tells you to do.

The whole ordeal is utterly demoralizing – a feeling that you quickly grow accustomed to.

Later, I was met by a man who had agreed, as a favor to a mutual friend, to escort me to what was to become my home for the next year - Ramallah. I remember breathing a sigh of relief after I got into the bus, looking forward to a pleasant jaunt through Jerusalem, perhaps spotting some sites along the way.

I was wrong. Again.

It was on the next leg of that “pleasant jaunt” that I experienced my first significant encounter with a street soldier, patrolling the infamous Kalandia checkpoint. I was taking a photograph of hundreds of men and women lined up along rows of barbed wire with their Palestinian IDs in hand, hoping to convince the guards to let them pass with as little trouble as possible. As I snapped a few photos, I suddenly felt a cool metal graze the back of my neck. My entire body froze when I turned around to an AK-47 held at eye-level by one of the IDF's finest. “What's a pretty American girl doing around here?” Words failed me. I'm not sure what I managed to mumble in my terrified trance, but whatever it was, it prompted a smirk as he made a remark to his partner in Hebrew and walked away. Soon after, I returned to my senses when I heard the sobs of a mother, kneeling down to calm her adolescent son who had just been knocked in the head by the butt of a soldier's gun. The checkpoint was loud and chaotic and belligerent by its very nature. The air was smoky and suffocating and smelled like fire. I was dirty and tired and had a lump in my throat that never went away. I was ready to go home.

It was then that I sank into a silent resignation that I might have made a mistake. This mess was so much more than the 6 o'clock news briefing or the front page of the Times – it was outrageous. I had been inside the country for less than 48 hours, and already it was apparent that

Israel's flagrant disregard for human rights was matched only by Palestine's utter disdain for the existence of Israel. I never realized hate could permeate a race like it has these people.

Only days after that hellish first trip to Ramallah, I decided to relocate to Bethlehem. Although Bethlehem has had more than its share of violence, as is the case in all of the West Bank, the population there is just slightly more moderate. The Christian community, albeit a very small minority, is a bit larger, and the locals are far more accepting of foreigners. And most importantly, the inevitability of a war with Iraq was clear and the last place I wanted to be walking the streets was in an extreme Islamic community where America is unquestionably the enemy.

My transition to Bethlehem would have been far more pleasant had the town not been put under military curfew the day after I arrived. Sitting on the balcony of my new apartment, I overlooked incoming Armored Personnel Carriers as they rolled through Manger Square, the birthplace of the "Prince of Peace". Ironic, isn't it? "*Manua Tagoa*," Hebrew for "Run like hell," resonated from the APC speakers as the soldiers made their incursion. Curfew is what the locals call the "collective punishment" inflicted on communities by the IDF. Curfew means that no one can leave his or her home at any time for any reason, and is arbitrarily imposed as punishment on Palestinians after recent acts of violence, potential acts of violence, or, well, no acts of violence. Last year, Bethlehem alone was under curfew for more than 150 days, and as far as I can tell, the reasons were unclear and often nonexistent. And for whatever their reasons may have been, humanitarian law prohibits collective punishment. Try telling that to Mr. Sharon.

This particular curfew began the previous night with the shooting of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian sniper fire in Manger Square. A friend and I decided that we would go out to dinner to celebrate my move over malfoof and hummus, a couple local favorites. On the way home from Abu Shanab's Restaurant, we cut through the Square, where a large, animated crowd of men and boys were gathered around a vehicle. We could hear the all-too-recognizable sirens prefacing the arrival of Red Crescent aid. The blood from the shooting was fresh on the ground and a shelled car was still smoking. All the men were busy recounting their versions of events, as I caught a glimpse of a group of boys whose eyes had seen images of hate and hostility that I pray our youth will never be exposed to, much less desensitized to.

And so began my first curfew, and my second day, in Bethlehem.

That night was bleakly quiet, as Bethlehem settled into curfew. I couldn't sleep, so I spent the night camped on my balcony staring into the dark. No city lights illuminated the streets of Bethlehem. Only the distant Jewish settlement of Gilo could be seen. The first night is always the hardest. And the following morning broke with even less cheer after an explosion rocked my building. A home across the street had just been demolished, and again, the sirens howled. Along with every animal in a 2-mile radius. It was deafening. I saw a flash of light and heard a noise like thunder. Then the whole sky filled with smoke. The lump in my throat seemed to be growing, as well as my anger towards the situation. I just didn't understand.

Weeks wore on and I continued to take part in all that my new surroundings offered. I began learning Arabic, volunteering with area NGOs and peace groups, and started to teach English. I got to know the local shopkeeper and my next door neighbor, Abu Nasser. My taxi driver became my closest Palestinian friend, Soliman Ali, from the outlying village of Ta'amrah. Iyad Abdullah would come over weekly for homemade "Southern" favorites. My students were exceptional and teeming with energy. And Bob, my housemate and a man from my hometown in Virginia, became my best friend. Before I knew it, I was feeling at home.

It's certainly true that the people make all the difference. I used to pray that I would find one friend. Just one person to pass Saturday afternoons with. What I found was a family. I remember my first meal at Soliman's home. He invited me to come over for a sheep dinner with his wife and eight children. His house was modest – a two-room cement slab with no electricity and a make-shift kitchen. He had goats for milk and cheese, sheep for meat, and few chickens for eggs, all loitering around the door. I had no idea at the time, that in less than an hour, one of them would be on my plate. I walked with Soliman outside, while he surveyed his flock. Grabbing the largest sheep, he pulled the head back and with one deep cut, slaughtered dinner. The look of satisfaction on Soliman's face was priceless – the triumph of the proud hunter and his conquest. His wife, a traditional Muslim woman whose days consist primarily of service to her husband and family, took over the butchering. Dinner was served on the floor, and we sat in a circle around an enormous plate of rice and sheep liver, which we scooped up with our hands and pieces of pita bread. One thing is for sure, the sheep that evening was without a doubt, the freshest piece of meat I'd ever put in my mouth.

Soliman is a devote Muslim. And a devote friend. He prays, like all Muslims, five times a day, wearing his white *dishdash*, the customary dress, and his black and white *kaffiah*, the head

covering that is a symbol of his Palestinian roots. He's been the one to teach me the essentials in this region of the world where blending in is so vital. We've spoken candidly about everything from politics to religion to sex. We've shopped together at the market. He taught me how to bargain. One day when the temperature was soaring past 120 degrees Fahrenheit, he drove me around to find a quiet little spot to take a swim. And he's the one who taught me that no matter where you go in the world, and regardless of how foreign the first impressions, the human race is all about the same.

As a woman, our conversations about sex and gender were perhaps the most interesting to me. One afternoon when he picked me up, I came prancing out of the house in a pair of cropped pants and a short-sleeved shirt. Abu Nasser, my neighbor, was sitting outside drinking a syrupy cup of Turkish coffee and watching the kids walk home from school along Wadi Mali. You would have thought I'd forgotten to put on anything. The kids stopped walking. Abu Nasser's face dropped. And Soliman, in typical Arab form, leapt to my defense, spouting out something to the locals. You'll never have a more loyal friend than an Arab. Abu Nasser walked up to Soliman, and a grin began to crawl across Soliman's face. He just kept shaking his head. I was picking up a few words, trying to figure out what was being said. I kept hearing "*mara*" – "wife". Oh no, I thought. That afternoon was the beginning of ongoing proposals for my hand in marriage. Abu Nasser is looking for his third wife, a custom in Muslim countries, and although Soliman set his jaw at the selling price of 60 camels and 20,000 shekels, Abu Nasser has been determined to talk him down. He hasn't been successful yet, but that was the last time I came bounding out of the house in anything that showed skin – even my ankles. There are just some things that simply aren't acceptable.

That certainly wasn't my first cultural faux pas.

Months passed and the Arab Street became an increasing hostile place for an American, as war with Iraq was looming. The thought of leaving the area never seriously crossed my mind, although I knew with certainty that things could get ugly. The local anti-American sentiment was sharply rising and war-time rhetoric had begun. Even gas masks were getting doled out on street corners. Fear was setting in.

A few days prior to the declaration of war, I was sitting on my balcony, enjoying a warm afternoon and playing my guitar for the children who had gathered beneath. Within a few minutes, the pleasantries of the afternoon were trampled by a loud and angry crowd storming

down Wadi Mali, carrying the body of a murdered girl from Beit Sahour, a neighboring town. Standing above the funeral procession, I was able to see the flag of Palestine draped over the small body, her face exposed. A few participants saw me watching and started yelling profanities in my direction. Sometimes you wonder what to say, but the reality is, there are no words. No words of reconciliation for the family of a six-year old girl who was senselessly shot on her way home for school. So you stand and watch and wonder when, and if, the hate will ever go away.

But it didn't. Two days later, George W. Bush declared war on Iraq and the bombs started to fall. It's hard to wholly depict the situation that unfolded. Daily demonstrations against people like me, Americans, kept me harbored inside my apartment. On the few occasions that I did venture out, Soliman would pick me up and stay right by my side. Even things with he and I were a bit more somber than what I was used to. U.S. flags were burned. Anti-American posters displayed messages of mass murder against all U.S. visitors to the Holy land.

At night, I fell asleep to the hum of F-16s and the whine of Drones overhead.

*"Paranoid.*

*Every time I hear a truck pass, I freeze. Is it another APC? More soldiers? Or is it the Arabs? I sit and wait for the sound of gunfire."*

It was one tough place to be.

But things eventually simmered down, as they often do, and although peace is in short supply in the Middle East, at least some level of calm resumed. Shops reopened and children went back to school. Taxi drivers reconvened in Manger Square and olive wood artisans, who seem to make up most of the labor force, returned to their workshops. As for the rest of the locals, I'm not quite sure what they did. With the economy in shambles and 40% unemployment, it's a wonder hunger and homelessness isn't out of control.

If before the war, my presence as one of only three Americans in the area wasn't known, after the war, everyone knew my face. The residents of Bethlehem are rather enjoyable people and always full of questions and stories and things to talk about. It's often hard to find ways to pass the time in such a restricted area, so your option is usually limited to conversation. And that was exactly what I was there for. So I listened. I listened to their stories of life before the latest *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, Arabic for "shaking off" or "uprising", that began in September 2000, when the military presence was the exception rather than the rule. I listened to them tell me about the

deaths in their family and their hopes for the future. With little to do, you learn to sit back and stomach a cup of thick Arabic coffee and appreciate the companionship.

When I wasn't listening, I was talking – teaching English to girls in Beit Sahour. The girls were bubbling with energy and always quick to smile. They were brighter than I expected – well-read with an interdisciplinary background that would put many of our public school students to shame. Resources weren't as abundant as the classrooms I grew up in, but they were sufficient and the girls never seemed to mind.

One afternoon after class, one of the younger students, Rasha, approached me with an apprehensive, but almost giddy, glow. She asked if I would look at something on the condition that I kept the strictest of confidence. “Sure, what can I do for you?” Out of her book bag, she pulled an envelope of photographs. A smile lit up her face. They were photographs of her hair, taken by her younger sister. It was long and dark and beautiful. At 12 years of age, and as the daughter of a Muslim man, she had been wearing a scarf for most of her life. I rarely covered my head unless the situation necessitated it, and my hair was always of great fascination to the girls. Especially Rasha. I'll never forget that smile on the face of a young Muslim girl coming of age.

I didn't ever have the opportunity to teach boys, but there was never any lack of interaction with them. Boys could most often be found refining their skills in the local sport – stone throwing. Commonly, the targets were soldiers or unfamiliar faces, so it's never a surprise to suddenly get popped in the back of the head and then hear a few snickers coming from behind an old cart. Yes, boys will be boys.

It's remarkable what people can adjust to. Every intricate detail of my days in the West Bank was different than what I've always known in the comforts of my Western upbringing. In the morning at or about 4:30am, the first prayer call from the minarets is heard. “*Allah Akbar*”. “God is great.” When you've got 80 mosques in short range, and each is competing to be the loudest, it can really wake you up. Unless, of course, the sounds of gunfire or the loud explosions throughout the night haven't already gotten you out of bed. Baths are a weekly affair. Television consists of two channels. Laundry is a woman's nightmare. And it's a guarantee that by dinner time, electricity starts to get fickle. And to think, I had it much better than most.

On a few occasions, unlike the local Arabs that I served, I was able to travel. From Jericho to Jordan, Egypt to Eilat. I frequented Jerusalem on a once-weekly basis, usually for the sake of my own sanity. It's amazing the difference that 5 kilometers can make. You might as

well be in another world. The walled city of Jerusalem is extraordinary. You can feel, even smell, the history - walking through narrow stone streets, meandering through crowds and observing local street vendors who carry their goods on carts pulled by donkeys. It's archaic and dark and absolutely wonderful. The golden dome of the Al-Aqsa Mosque glistens above. It's amazing to me to think that most Palestinians have never visited Jerusalem, a place close enough to see, but impossible to reach – yet another outcome of the Occupation.

The effects of the Israeli Occupation are seen and felt in every facet of daily life. Everywhere, posters of martyrs are hung, and slogans defying Israeli leadership and praising Palestinian heritage are painted on walls and storefronts. If there's ever been a place where politics has run a muck, this was the place where it all happened. And subsequently, in an effort to untangle this mess of humanity, I wanted to get involved.

The more I learned about the politics of the region, the more complex the situation was becoming to me. Pick a date in history, and you'll find a conflict brewing in the Middle East. To foster my understanding, I've had the opportunity to speak with a number of Middle Eastern authorities, foreign diplomats, and United States government officials – from Yassir Arafat to Presidents Clinton and Bush, members of Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, PFLP, Hizbullah, Likud and Labor. I'd like to say I figured it all out, but it seems as though the moment I begin to make progress, I find myself seated across from Yassir Arafat as he bows his head to offer a “Christian” prayer. And then all those stereotypes that I knew to be so accurate, become obsolete. Or a militant Islamic Jihad activist strikes up a conversation with me, telling me that God and Allah are the same being and one day we'll all live together in paradise. Or I join a Jewish family for dinner along with their daughter-in-law, a Muslim Palestinian.

It couldn't be more obvious what a clash of irreconcilable extremes the Middle East is – unadulterated hate and unbelievable kindness, the birth of civilization and the end of the world, the cursed Holy Land.

Life in the West Bank, and in the Third World at large, invariably begs the question “What hope is there for the future?” When you've seen pain and suffering in the eyes of men, women, and children, you wonder if the struggle will ever end.

For myself, I'll let the experts tackle that one. I've got a plane back to Tel Aviv to catch.