

Palestine and Israel: December 1999

"Would you like French Fries with your security check?"

This ironic question is how I once characterised the security check process when entering and especially leaving Israel. I have experienced it many times. It always seems a bit unreal. It was as if the interrogators, usually young and primarily women, were more interested in form than content and in asking a particular line of questions than in the answers produced. More interested in ticking off some brain-held checklist than in detecting truth or lies.

Indeed, I long ago formed the view that the security check is part of an elaborate and hugely successful public relations campaign to impress upon the world that Israel is a nation under great threat. The elaborate, sometimes offensive, probing at the security check is part of this propaganda. It's a huge ruse but a masterful and clever one, nonetheless.

So here I am in Cyprus, waiting to board El Al for the short flight to Tel Aviv.

"What have you been doing in Cyprus?"

"Teaching."

"You're a teacher."

"Well, I was this week. Normally, I am the Vice President of World Vision International for this region."

"Do you have a business card?" I whip it out, just as though I expected her to ask. I did. She reads it carefully. This is a common feature of these interviews. The interrogator reads things you give them with extreme slowness. It is as if they are checking the serifs on each letter for correct dimensions. Or maybe just trying to make you wonder if something is wrong with your business card. Or your job. Or maybe you. Then again, they might be thinking about what question to ask next. This might be how they have been trained to cover confusion.

"So. You work for this organisation in Vienna?"

"Correct." That's what the card says.

"And you were here to ... teach?"

"Correct." Why should I help? Another long pause. Reading the card. Maybe there is an explanation in there somewhere.

"What did you teach?" Thought of another question, see.

"I did a session each day on the cultural interpretation of the parables of Jesus."

"Do you have your notes with you?" This is also standard fare. If they choose, they will ask you to verify your statements. On the face of it, one might be a terrorist. One might be lying. You must be cautious. Israel is under threat, remember.

Depending on the interviewer's assessment, this line of questioning goes on for a short or long while. One thing to guarantee an extended interview is the following:

"Are you travelling alone?"

"No, I am with that fellow in the red shirt. He was one of the students at the training program I was teaching."

The "fellow in the red shirt" is Tanas, a Palestinian from near Bethlehem in the West Bank.

"Oh!" More studying of my passport and other papers, and more questions about the conference. With verification, please.

The entire process is conducted with extreme pleasantness. Never does the interrogator suggest that you are a terrorist yourself—not even your friend over there in the red shirt. It is simply that "someone might use you." In my experience, the interrogators are always well-mannered and even apologetic. Often, they smile and joke.

Finally, you know the interrogator has satisfied herself that you've got the message, whatever message that is when she says: "I need to ask you some questions specifically about your luggage."

Then, they will launch into the now time-honoured and familiar list of questions that every airline asks about who packed your bags, where they have been since you packed them, and whether anyone gave you a gift to carry on their behalf.

Soon, the interview is over, and the interrogator says, "I'm sorry to have delayed you. I hope you understand these questions are for your protection."

I always reply, "Of course. No problem. I understand perfectly."

In less than an hour, not much longer than it takes for the interview, in this case, I am in Israel. I am welcomed by a vast display of unclaimed luggage spread from one side of the baggage reclaim area to the other. A strike earlier in the day has held up baggage handling. Hundreds of people must have left the airport without their bags. Someone now has the big job of reuniting all these lost boxes with their lost owners.

The next day, I am near the green line. Once, during the war in nearby Lebanon, I asked someone why the Green Line in Beirut was called the Green Line.

"Because no one lived or moved in these lines between the opposing forces," he explained, "and pretty soon, the weeds grew up and turned the place green."

There is something poetic and profound about that. In the space between wars, nature grows.

In Israel, however, the green lines are really green. On the Israeli side of the line separating Israel from its Occupied Territories, one often finds a forest. The hems of Israel's skirts are trees.

I am in a small West Bank town called Battir. South of Jerusalem, it clings to a steep hillside. It looks over a narrow valley at the green of well-watered Israeli hemlines.

Israel has set the border along one side of the main street. Theoretically, at least almost half of this town is in Israel. Or, at least, on land Israel claims is necessary for its security. Palestinians can live on this land if they already have a house but cannot improve it without permission. Permission is not available.

One consequence is that the school is now hopelessly inadequate. It happens to be located in the security zone.

I met with members of the local "focus group." This group works with World Vision facilitator Ibrahim on community development issues. They told me their plans for a new community centre to meet multiple needs, including health care, schooling and a place for the youth to gather.

Nearby is the village of Husan. It is cut in two by a major highway. Roads in the West Bank make it easy for Israeli settlers to get from Jerusalem to the settlements. Sometimes, they help the locals, too. But only accidentally.

This one goes right down one side of the village. It cuts a minefield in two. These are Jordanian mines laid decades before. The minefield is marked and fenced off with barbed wire. Sometimes, animals wander into their deaths. Many parents fear that one day, a small child will do likewise.

Ironically, some minefields were cleared to make way for the road. However, the road designers' generosity did not extend to locals.

Down the road further is an unusual village named Wadi Fuqin. Unusual because it was one of many similar villages deserted in 1948. Driving across Israel today, one can still see many of these sites because of the tell-tale presence of the cactus-like Prickly Pear. This plant was used as fencing. Once the villages were deserted and demolished, the prickly pear proliferated to mark the site where Palestinians once lived.

In Wadi Fuqin, everyone left in 1948, and the village was destroyed. Then, remarkably, they were permitted to return in 1973, and the town was gradually rebuilt. Tom, World Vision's director here, commented, "If Israel wanted to demonstrate its sincerity, the one thing that would send out the biggest message would be to allow Palestinians back to rebuild their villages."

"Hmm," I thought with heavy irony, "they could call it the Right of Return." Every Jew in the world has "the Right of Return" to Israel, granted by the Israeli government. Why not extend the principle to other displaced and oppressed persons?

In Wadi Fuqin, the village is squeezed into the bottom of the valley, unlike at Battir. Here, the Israeli security logic is different. The hills on either side of the valley are considered security zones, and a thin dirt road has been carved along either side of the narrow valley. Beyond that, the villagers may go to tend their orchards but nothing else. As it grows, the village is squeezed into the width of the valley floor—about two hundred metres.

One hundred ninety-two families live here now. They have 2000 dunums (about 200 hectares) and another 500 that are "under threat" from settlements.

"So far, 7,500 dunums of land that used to belong to the village have been taken by the settlers," I was told.

Given their history of working together to regain their village and then rebuild it, World Vision finds rich experience on which to base the work of an Area Development Program. I met with the focus group here, and they shared their history and challenges.

"What is your professional opinion of what we should do?" one of them asks me.

"My professional opinion," I reply, "is that your wisdom and experience are much more useful in answering that question than mine."

Later, we drive south towards Hebron. In the middle of Palestinian villages and orchards, a group of Israelis is staging a protest. Their signs urge the Israeli government to destroy all the Palestinian houses and farms in the area.

High above the Dead Sea, we visit a village called Beni Naim. World Vision has had an association here for many years, unlike the earlier villages. A very substantial and professional community centre has grown. It has a large, multi-faceted program. It seems unappreciative to find fault with it. Still, because of how World Vision and other NGOs have worked in the past, it is too easy for such institutions to become completely dependent on the agencies for income. One kind of dependence is merely replaced by another.

But the picture here looks bright. The institution has already demonstrated its independent fundraising potential. It has secured grants from agencies other than World Vision, which is a good start in helping them develop the skills to be sustainable. The work ahead is to develop

skills for envisioning a future and working to accomplish it. It's the difference between giving a fish and teaching someone how to fish.

It is Ramadan. So, I am fasting—not for myself but out of respect for our Muslim hosts and colleagues. In Beni Naim, they invite us to stay for breakfast, which is pronounced as two distinct words: Break Fast. It will happen as the sun sets in an hour or so. In the meantime, our hosts show us around the centre, and then we pile into a small bus to see the panoramic view of the Dead Sea.



Away to our right is one of many Israeli settlements we have seen on the way. This one appears deserted. Most of the fifty or more houses are shuttered and closed. There are only two or three cars in the streets. The street talk is that up to half of these settlements are unoccupied. A village is a fact on the ground. Perhaps populating it is secondary.

Given that the hills around and down to the Dead Sea are entirely barren, this settlement's well-greened streets and gardens are remarkable. And I do remark on it.

"That's why my water has been off for three weeks," says one of the hosts.

The sun is setting fast, and so is the fast. We are welcomed at the home of the institution's president. Inside the door of the house is a large lounge room with formal seating on three sides. We are about 12—five from World Vision and seven from Beni Naim. A teenage boy brings a glass of water, and we all sip. A second teenage boy brings a plate of dates. Each person takes one and eats it. The fast is broken. People smoke. One man goes to the corner of the room and prays. No one takes any notice of him. Nor is there a lull in the conversation. This seems unusual from the perspective of a Protestant Christian. We would try to be quiet while someone was praying. But then, few Christians are sufficiently religious to interrupt daily routines for prayer. So, when a Christian prays, it is exceptional. When a Muslim prays, it is a normal part of life. Meanwhile, the rest of life goes on. As the one praying finishes, another unobtrusively replaces him until, one by one, most have prayed.

In the next room, a large dining table is covered with a feast. There is yellow rice with nuts and chickpeas, yogurt, small dishes of all kinds of dips and sauces, tomatoes, olives, pickles, onions, capsicums, lamb on the bone, big chunks of beef, moist chicken that falls off the bone as you lift it onto your plate, flatbread, thin bread.

We stand around the table to eat. In Middle Eastern tradition, the host must offer us a meal, and we must eat. But then we are hungry, which helps.

A big man is introduced to me as Noah, "one of the four hundred." When my face reveals no understanding of the meaning of this statistic, they explain.

"You remember in 1992 that four hundred were taken in the dark and dumped in South Lebanon?"

"Yes, I do remember that. They were there for a long time."

"Noah is one of the four hundred." Noah nods with a shrug, showing that he considers it a small thing.

"The Lebanese gave them tents," explains another, "and they lived like that for twelve months."

"You're a hero," I say. Noah tilts his head as if to say, "Perhaps. And it's no big deal."

After breaking the fast in this magnificent style, a teenage boy brings hot tea in small glasses to hold by the rim to avoid scalding one's fingers. Then he offers cigarettes. Most smoke. Finally, he offers toothpicks.

One of the locals tells me he is banned from driving into Jerusalem.

"I am banned from all passes," he says, as if proudly. Israel will not give him any passes to travel outside of his area. "But, you know there is one road through Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives without a single checkpoint. I go that way."

"You mean that the Israelis don't know about this road?" I ask.

"Oh, of course, they know about it. But they leave it." I want to explore the meaning of this, but the moment has passed. Is it mere generosity? Or is it a way of deliberately creating punishable behaviour? Or what?

"The main danger is if there is trouble in Jerusalem while you are there," explains my host. "Like a bomb. Or an attack on Israelis. Then, for sure, you would be in jail. Tortured for 21 days."

"In fact," explains another, "that might be true whether you entered Jerusalem legally or not. If there is a bomb, anyone who looks like a Palestinian is at risk of arbitrary detention and torture. They don't ask where you work."

Another day, I am back in Gaza. A cooperative official who knows World Vision and its people makes the checkpoint process easy. A Palestinian colleague from East Jerusalem, making her first visit to Gaza, is offered an instant three-month pass. She is amazed.

There is a very great danger, for me as much as for Israelis and Palestinians, of stereotyping. All Palestinians are not terrorists, although one would be forgiven for thinking this is the view of the airport security check. Some are terrorists, of course. Not all Israelis are land-grabbing Arab haters, although you would be forgiven for thinking this based on the television news coverage of the protests against returning the Golan Heights to Syria. Some are, of course.

Even a few days in Israel and Palestine make you realise that there is good and evil on all sides here. Many Israelis are appalled at the oppression of the Arabs. There are human rights groups within Israel, such as "Rabbis for Human Rights", who have campaigned for Bedouin land rights. Within the Israeli government, several public officials help the NGOs do practical work while maintaining loyalty to their paymasters. It is a complicated place. It is more straightforward to report on than to analyse.

So, although I am surprised to encounter a helpful officer of the Israeli Defence Forces, I recognise that such people exist. Indeed, our hopes for peace and reconciliation depend largely on the world's ability to empower these forces to make and maintain peace. As Mary Anderson's group says, it depends on building local capacities for peace. And it is people like this who look for the peace-affirming actions that will create true reconciliation.

Things have changed a lot in Gaza since I last visited. New roads are being built, and buildings are going up. But, as in Beirut, progress is a cruel illusion.

"It's all infrastructure," says a colleague. "Who is the Palestinian National Authority buying the roads from? Who are we paying for the new buildings? Israel! Meanwhile, no one helps ordinary people earn income. Everyone will starve, but we'll have nice roads."

No one is working on income generation except for World Vision and some other NGOs, one of which is the Union of Agricultural Workers. Mohammed shows us their wonderful model greenhouse farm in the centre of Gaza and, later, an even larger one further south.

Mohammed explains the journey of the Union. It is the same journey made by every serious development agency.

We began with relief. "We started in 1986 just helping farmers survive," explains Mohammed. By 1989, we were promoting agriculture as a way of creating jobs. We saw that if we created jobs, that would give people income."

"By 1992, we saw that real development was needed," Mohammed continues. "So we concentrated on developing an extension program and not just growing. Not just jobs. But teaching, showing, and helping farmers to farm better. We started to reclaim land for farming. We saw that we could create income for the Union to make its programs self-sustaining. Now 35% of our running costs are covered by sales from our greenhouses."



And you should see the crops! Tomato vines are so laden with fruit that you can hardly see the leaves. Cucumbers are so sweet you can eat them like oranges.

But if there is to be another war here, maybe it will be over water. This is a desert country. Some people claim that Israel and Palestine cannot support the vast population that has grown here in the past fifty years. Gaza gets about half of the water it needs each year.

Meanwhile, the still technically illegal Israeli settlements in Gaza take enormously disproportionate volumes of water. Five thousand settlers use almost as much water as 1,100,000 Palestinians. (See Israeli disengagement from Gaza. (2024, July 7). In [Wikipedia.](#))

We drive by the White House, as Yassar Arafat's new home is called. Beside the ramshackle reality of Gaza City, the White House is an actual palace. Around it are the new houses of PNA officials. Here is the visible symbol of Palestinian dismay.

I am surprised at the cynicism I hear about the PNA. One person describes it as "a Vichy regime", recalling the Nazi-collaborating government of France during the German occupation.

I question the parallel. "What do you mean? That the PNA is collaborating with the Israeli government?" It seems incredible.

"Yes. We think Arafat wants only a Palestinian State. He will sacrifice anything for that?" The rule of political life is the same everywhere - the ends justify the means. It's regrettable but too often true.

"Why? What kind of strategy is that?"

"The camel's nose in the tent," which I translate with another metaphor: "Like a foot in the door?"

"Exactly. He thinks that if he gets the State, we can fight for land, water, market access and so on later."

"Maybe he's right." I speculate.

"Maybe he's not. Maybe these officials are just lining their pockets while ordinary people suffer. It's a shame." He uses the Arab word for shame, *yaa e'ib*, to emphasise his disgust.