

# Presbyterian Record

## So often, perspective depends on where you are standing (Record in progress)

Fri Nov 1 2002  
Byline: Mark Lewis  
Source: The Canadian Index (Magazines)

[Graph Not Transcribed]

[Graph Not Transcribed]

I was not sure how much time I would have with President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah so I planned my questions carefully. By the time we arrived in the Middle East, I decided I would address the matter of Palestinian suicide bombings. I would ask Mr. Arafat to do all in his power to end these cruel acts against innocent Jewish civilians. I knew it would be a difficult matter to discuss with him but I could think of no other issue as pressing.

We did not go directly to Ramallah, a West Bank Palestinian town 16 kilometres north of Jerusalem. We travelled through the Middle East in the company of the Department of Services to Palestinian Refugees. We saw Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Gaza, met with Palestinian civil rights leaders and Palestinian families doing their best to live day by day under the Israeli military occupation and talked with Jewish civil rights advocates who shook their heads in shame at the actions of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. My eyes were opened to a world of suffering seldom seen in North American news reports. By the time I reached President Arafat's compound, I still carried my first message but I had another message as well.

We were greeted in Bethlehem by Hanna Nasser, the mayor. He offered to give us a tour of the town. I thought he was offering a tour of the holy sites; instead, he showed us the damage throughout the town caused by the most recent Israeli invasion. Bethlehem's municipal building could have been the town hall of any small Canadian city, an office complex with a bright foyer and modest council chambers. It was being repaired after a violent invasion. Splintered office doors that had been ripped from their hinges were propped up against walls, broken office furniture was being removed and dozens of computers that had not been stolen were left destroyed.

"All we are trying to do is to manage a good and productive municipality here," said Mayor Nasser, a Christian Palestinian. "Yet every time we make some progress, the Israelis invade and destroy everything we have worked to build." As I surveyed the damage, I was at a loss for words. I believe the Israelis have the right to protect themselves against terrorists, but the invasion of Bethlehem seemed to be a cruel act directed at Palestinian civilians. In the village of Beit Sahour, better known to tourists as The Shepherds Field, we found more destruction. The enthusiasm of Mayor Fuad Kokaly seemed to dwindle to despair as he showed us more evidence of

how the Israeli military had destroyed his town's attempts to rebuild its economy.

Everywhere we went in the Middle East, Palestinian people were working hard to rebuild villages and homes only to be thwarted by what appeared to be cruel and senseless acts carried out by the Israeli military. We saw ruined water-purification plants, fields of figs and grapes destroyed by Israeli tanks, and Palestinian children deprived of education, medical care and proper nutrition because of Israeli travel restrictions. This is an aspect of the Middle East conflict rarely seen in North American media.

I went to the Middle East filled with anger at the cruelty and inhumanity of the Palestinian suicide bombings, senseless acts directed at Jewish civilians; now that I was seeing the conflict first-hand, I was humbled by the quiet dignity of the Palestinian people struggling against overwhelming odds. I still grieve with innocent Israelis who are victims of suicide bombings; but, now, I also grieve with innocent Palestinians. How can they hope to compete with the fourth largest army in the world, ready to strike against them at any moment?

When we reached President Yasser Arafat's compound, my perception of the Middle East conflict was far different than it had been a week earlier. My first message to Mr. Arafat was that I had seen the struggle of his people and had grown to respect them for their resolve and determination in the midst of a cruel military occupation. We spoke at length about his fear that the Western world was not aware of the circumstances of ordinary Palestinian civilians. He reminded me that the United Nations Security Council had passed two resolutions demanding that Israel withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza. I told him The Presbyterian Church in Canada and KAIROS (Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives) stood with the United Nations in seeking an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza.

It was easy to talk to President Arafat about the plight of the Palestinians; it was more difficult to broach the matter of Palestinian suicide bombers. "President Arafat," I said, "I grieve with the Palestinian people, but many innocent Israelis have also suffered. You must do all in your power to end the suicide bombings. They are hateful and wrong acts and they do not bring any sympathy to the cause of the Palestinians."

The room was dead quiet until Mr. Arafat's secretary of state spoke sharply in Arabic. I thought my remarks had angered him. Another minister whispered, "He is repeating your statement word for word to be sure that the president fully understands."

After a moment, Mr. Arafat said: "I am against the suicide bombings. I have told my people over and over to stop them, but I cannot control them all." I was satisfied by this answer. I had seen how disrupted Palestinian society is and how difficult communications are between various Palestinian locations under the Israeli occupation. I had also seen Palestinians living in the sort of hopeless and humiliating circumstances that can only produce hatred and violence.

Our time with Mr. Arafat was over. We had a flight to catch from Ben-Gurion airport. I had delivered my original message, and I hoped I had conveyed genuine compassion for all the people suffering in the Middle East -- Israeli and Palestinian alike. I continue to pray that moderates on both sides of the conflict will win out over radical voices before it is too late.

Moderator's itinerary

November 17

50th anniversary, Pine Ridge, Toronto

November 22-26

Assembly Council, Jackson's Point, Ont.

December 4

Advent worship

St. Andrew's (King Street), Toronto