

'Welcome to the State of Israel': Visitors Not Welcomed

By Rudy Brueggemann. Published April 2004. © 2004, Rudy Brueggemann. All rights reserved.

Flying half-way around the world from America to the Holy Land is effortless, unlike the short trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and to the nearby Judean Wilderness. The road connecting Jerusalem and neighboring Bethlehem crosses a disputed boundary separating Israel and the Occupied Territories and a political gulf that neither Palestinians nor the Israelis seem capable of bridging.

Though neighbors, the two historic cities from Biblical times are worlds apart.

Jerusalem, revered by Christians as the city where

their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was crucified and rose from the dead before ascending into heaven, is a modern metropolis and the self-declared Israeli capital. Bethlehem, also claimed by Christians as their Messiah's birthplace, technically is under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, but effectively under Israel's military control.

Because of continuing hostilities between Israel and Occupied Palestine, most travelers and—I believe—millions of possible Christian tourists are deterred from making even this short hop on one of the world's oldest and most famous pilgrims' circuits, to the economic detriment of the impoverished Palestinians and the Israelis.

During my recent trip to the Holy Land, the escalating intifada made this ancient pilgrim's journey almost impossible. Nevertheless, I attempted the short trip on the morning of Feb. 2, 2004, taking a bus from Jerusalem's Old



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Morning light illuminates Jerusalem's Old City, a place claimed as sacred by Jews, Christians and Moslems. The state of Israel occupied the quarter from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan during the 1967 Six Day War and, in a disputed action, incorporated it into metropolitan Jerusalem.

City to the Israeli border checkpoint.

On this day, the birthplace of Christ was a community under siege. No Palestinian was allowed in nor any out—at least for those whose identity papers showed them as residents of Bethlehem.

Days earlier, on Jan. 29, a member of the Palestinian Authority's police force in Bethlehem had blown himself up on local bus in West Jerusalem, about 10 kilometers east of Bethlehem and blocks from the residence of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel's hard-line Likud Party leader. The explosion ripped apart Egged bus company's No. 19, killing 10 Israeli citizens and wounding dozens more, many critically. In response, the Israel Defense Forces sealed Bethlehem, allowing no one in and no one out who was a native.

On foot, I passed through a heavily guarded outpost on the main road between the two cities before entering a dead zone, devoid of

people and business and joy that soon became the outskirts of impoverished, trash-filled Bethlehem.

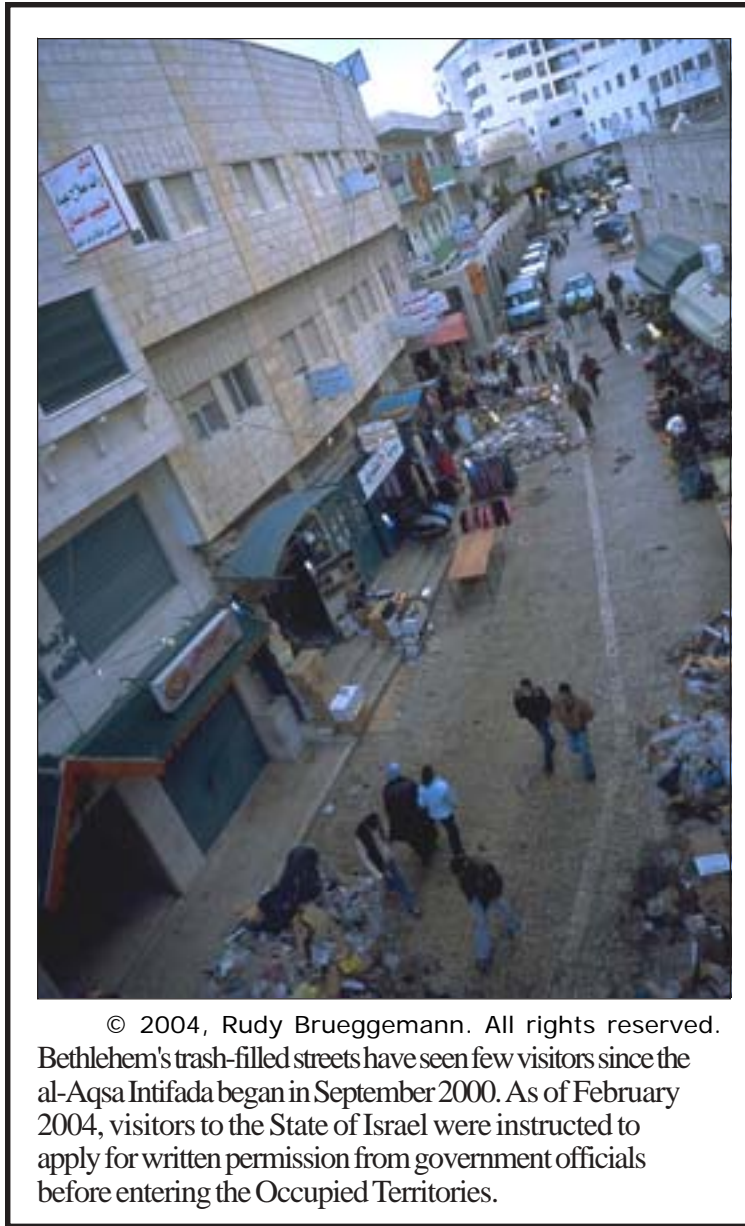
I came for two reasons. First, as the son of a Lutheran minister raised in the church, the lands of the prophets and of Christ continued to fascinate me as an adult, as had other sacred places the world over. Bethlehem, like Jerusalem, was high on my to-visit list. Second and more importantly, Bethlehem was the stopover point to visit the Judean wilderness.

There, about 14 kilometers east of Bethlehem, sits the Mar Saba

Monastery, one of the most majestic monuments to Christian monasticism.

Mar Saba ranks as the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world, dating from the 5th century after Christ. Though small in scale and smaller and less well-known than the more famous churches and mosques in nearby Jerusalem, Mar Saba is as visually pure and as visually stunning as any rival religious structure in the Holy City, or anywhere in the world. The monastery stands as a supreme testament to man's admirable devotion to God.

In 2001, preparing for another journey to Turkey, I first read an account of Mar Saba by William Dalrymple, a British travel writer who



© 2004, Rudy Brueggemann. All rights reserved. Bethlehem's trash-filled streets have seen few visitors since the al-Aqsa Intifada began in September 2000. As of February 2004, visitors to the State of Israel were instructed to apply for written permission from government officials before entering the Occupied Territories.

described it as belonging from another time. Reading Dalrymple's words, I knew, as if by providence, I would go to the monastery. That meant going to Bethlehem first.

Nearing the center of the Bethlehem, I was invited into a shop run by Christian Palestinians. The shop was stuffed with Christian souvenirs. The men huddled together, watching the street while drinking sweet dark tea and smoking cigarettes.

"I read in a newspaper yesterday that this policeman bomber lived with twelve brothers and sisters in a small apartment, with two

rooms," said Jarez, one of the Christian businessmen, in nearly fluent English. "He was the only one who had a job, earning 1,200 shekels [about \$270] a month. How can anyone feed a family with that kind of money?"

Jarez told me he owned the shop. He then introduced his family and associates. They all wanted to know who I was, and why I had walked into Bethlehem, now that it was off-limits. I told him I wanted to visit Mar Saba Monastery and needed a driver.

"How do you know about Mar Saba," Jarez asked, skeptically. "Most tourists here come to see the Church of the Nativity."

"Mar Saba is special, is it not," I replied with a

smile.

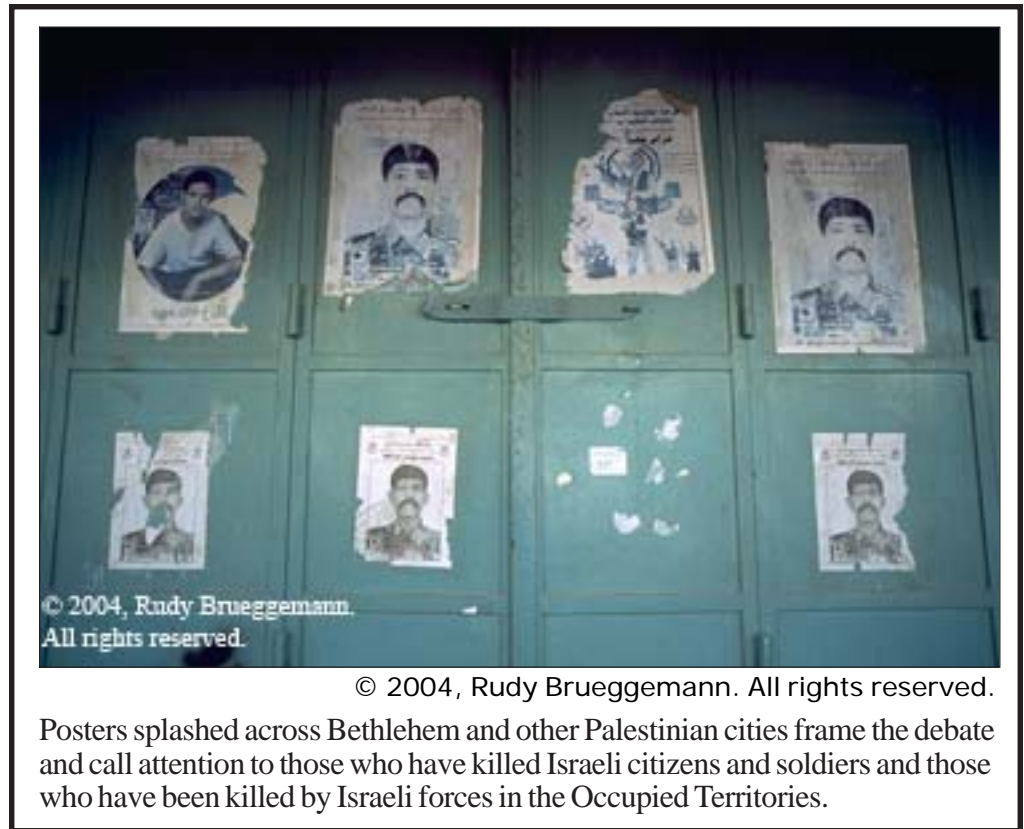
My response seemed to please him and the other men. So, Jarez offered to help—I think to make some money for himself and his relatives. We quickly negotiated a price and my driver Jonathan was called, as he too was related to Jarez. Before he could arrive, there was the necessary formality of tea and political conversation.

“And these pictures I see everywhere in town, with this man’s face, and the pictures of other men holding weapons, and the pictures of the little girl,” I asked Jarez, referring to the photos of former suicide bombers and civilians killed by the Israel Defense Forces during fights with Palestinians.

“Brainwashing,” replied Jarez of the propaganda distributed by Palestinian extremists in the Occupied Territories. “Religious brainwashing. Religion is the cause of all our problems here.” He shook his head in disgust.

The 24-year-old Palestinian policeman who carried out the recent suicide operation, Ali Yusuf Jaara, was among the many glorified in the posters and the latest so-called “martyr” in the continuing intifada—the second such uprising, called the al-Aqsa Intifada—by the Palestinian people against the state of Israel. The radical al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade and Hamas, groups that have used suicide bombers in the past to murder Israeli civilians and military forces, claimed responsibility for the morning attack.

In this case, Jaara reportedly responded to an Israel Defense Forces attack in Gaza that had killed nine Palestinians a day earlier—six civilians and three members of the radical militant groups. It was the same day two high-



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Posters splashed across Bethlehem and other Palestinian cities frame the debate and call attention to those who have killed Israeli citizens and soldiers and those who have been killed by Israeli forces in the Occupied Territories.

level U.S. officials were meeting with leaders of the Palestinian Authority to revive the collapsed “Road Map” peace talks launched by Bush administration.

“What is your name,” Jarez asked.

“Rudy Brueggemann,” I replied.

“This is a Jewish name,” he said, not as a question, but more as a statement of disdain. It would be the first of many times I was accused of having a Jewish name in the Occupied Territories and later in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which I visited briefly during my Israel “vacation.”

“No. It is a German name. I am not Jewish. In fact, my father was a Lutheran minister, and I was raised a Christian,” I replied, annoyed by the sudden racist undertone of the dialogue.

As far as I knew, I didn’t look Jewish, with light-brown hair and facial features more associated with Celts or Scandinavians—the ancestry of my forefathers. Certainly, the Israeli security forces didn’t think I looked Jewish. On three occasions during my trip and once before boarding the plane at Newark International Airport, they picked me out of a crowd of

mostly Israeli or Jewish travelers for additional questioning, because, I believe, they perceived me as not being Jewish.

Arriving at Ben-Gurion, I saw numerous American Jewish passengers on the plane walk to the baggage claim area after being stamped for entry. From what I saw, only I and a couple of Arab-looking passengers received secondary questioning, in my case from two young women in uniform: Why did I come to Israel; did I know anyone, have any friends here; did I speak Hebrew; why did I come now; was I sure I only was visiting Jerusalem, Eilat, and the Negev. And, on it went for a few more minutes until they let me pass.

Among non-Israelis, Christians and Muslims alike, I was likely someone who could be Jewish, and therefore not trusted. This all-important religious pegging seemed integral to how one was treated.

A few minutes later, my driver, Jonathan arrived. The half-Armenian and half-Christian-Palestinian man was Jarez's distant cousin. He drove a beat-up yellow and black Mercedes taxi. We agreed upon a fair price. No one in the shop was sure if we could leave Bethlehem, as the word-of-mouth news suggested that travel for Bethlehem natives was still restricted.

Soon, Jonathan's taxi passed through communities of ugly, squalid apartment blocks. We passed by piles of garbage that lay uncollected on the streets. Burned-out shells of busted cars and vans stood in empty lots. Olive groves were filled with equal parts rocks and rubbish. I saw lots of kids running around on the streets, with little to do.

The road passed by "Shepherds' Field." Here a Greek Orthodox church sits on the spot where, according to the gospels, the shepherds tended their flock and were visited by angels the night of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Today, it's a fenced area, surrounded by Bethlehem's impoverished sprawl.

Men and women lined the roads, many apparently without jobs, if the statistics were correct. About half of all Palestinians workers

are unemployed, according to Palestinian census officials—a figure that can rise during security crises that prevent Palestinians from moving between their homes and jobs. The United Nations Development Program pegged the average Palestinian's yearly earnings at \$1,300—far below a typical Israeli, who hauls in nearly \$18,000 annually.

Being here, I could better understand why a murderer like Jaara could become a hero to the disenfranchised Palestinian people of the West Bank. Most continued to live in poverty and without access to decent jobs or housing, or secure lives for themselves and their families.

Jonathan told me he didn't think we could clear the road block down the road, at a junction leading east to Mar Saba, as the road sign indicated.

"We are living in a prison," said Jonathan, as we approached the Israeli checkpoint. "What can we do? How can we make a living?"

Jonathan inhaled deeply on his cigarette and seemed to look right through me. The graying black hair and lines in his nearly 50-year-old face seemed more pronounced as he sighed. I had no answer.

The radical Palestinian groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade continued to employ suicide bombers to respond to Israel's continuing occupation of Palestinian land in the West Bank and Gaza, in the form of nearly a quarter of a million Jewish settlers in so-called settlements on Palestinian land.

Israel's previous response had been to target militant leaders with assassination and the destruction of homes of family members of suicide bombers. Israel's latest controversial solution to suicide mass murders was the ongoing construction of a massive security perimeter wall—called the "security barrier" by Israelis—to permanently separate the Israelis and Palestinians.

Known as "the wall" by its detractors, it literally will fence in the Palestinian civilians, but also protect Israeli citizens from more

Palestinian extremists bent on violence.

By the time I had arrived in Jerusalem on Jan. 30, construction of the wall had been well underway and had become the symbol of an international debate whether Israel was using the barrier as an excuse to continue its ongoing land grab of Palestinian territory or whether it was the only defense against terrorist bombings from Palestinian murderers.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch claims the wall is arbitrary, restricts the freedom of movement of tens of thousands of Palestinians, and violates Israel's obligation under the Geneva Conventions to care for people living under its occupation. The group—which also condemns Palestinian suicide bombings and vigilante murders as crimes against humanity—further claims the wall's route is designed to incorporate and make contiguous Israeli settlements constructed over the past three decades. Such settlements, in the Human Rights Watch's eyes, also violate the Geneva Conventions on transferring people and were, in its words, an "illegal enterprise."

There seemed to be no middle ground, and everyone I ran into in both the Occupied Territories and in Israel seemed despondent the violence would not end. Between September 2000 and February 2004, Israeli-Palestinian hostilities had taken nearly 3,500 lives and injured more than 30,000, most of them civilians, according to the Human Rights Watch. There was no sign any let-up from either side.

Such were the political minefields to cross just



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Settlements, like this one near Jerusalem, have been called an "illegal enterprise" by Human Rights Watch. Nearly a quarter of a million Israeli Jews live in such communities on occupied Palestinian land and remain a flash point in the conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people and surrounding Arab nations.

to visit holy places in the Holy Lands. No wonder tourism here was all but dead.

Back in the taxi, just outside Jesus's birth city, Jonathan extinguished his cigarette. He looked as nervous as I felt, out here at a checkpoint in an occupied area, with a total stranger, in a place where I was not welcomed.

Four vehicles were ahead of us—three cars and one taxi bus. There was a barbed wire barrier and an Israeli armored vehicle at the checkpoint, which had roads going to several destinations outside of Bethlehem, including Mar Saba. I saw six male soldiers there with thick bullet-protective flack vests, dark green uniforms, and large helmets like those worn by U.S. armed forces. All carried semi-automatic rifles.

A young soldier with light features who must have weighed nearly 200 pounds held up his left hand to the first vehicle in the queue. He motioned two fingers for the driver to advance.

The driver gave the soldier his identity papers.

The soldier spoke into his microphone attached to his helmet, and then had the male driver open the trunk. The inspection lasted a minute, and driver had to turn back to Bethlehem.

Jonathan told me we couldn't get through. I said I understood. As we backed up, we saw that one van ahead of us was allowed to drive on down the road to Mar Saba. Jonathan then said, let's try.

After two more cars were turned back, it was our turn. We received the same cool treatment from the soldier. Jonathan handed the young man his ID, and I gave him my passport. He barely looked at my document. Jonathan's ID mattered the most. It said he was from Bethlehem. The soldier wagged his wagging finger, and motioned for us to go back.

"I just want to see Mar Saba," I said. "He is my driver. That is all I want to do."

"He is from America," added Jonathan. "We just want to go to the holy monastery."

"No," said the soldier. He gave us back our documents and stepped back from the car.

Jonathan turned the car around and drove back up the hill. The cross hanging on Jonathan's rearview mirror swayed back and forth between us as the car sped through the hills towards the center of Bethlehem.

"This is not living. This is dying. We are dying here under the Israelis." He lit up another cigarette.

I paid Jonathan 25 shekels and hopped out of his car at Manger Square, in the heart of Bethlehem.

In central Bethlehem, thousands of Christians from around the world used to gather annually for Christmas Eve services. Scores of local business people could make a respectable living here from the sizable pilgrimage traffic by selling memorabilia, crosses, Byzantine-styled miniature paintings, wood carvings, Christmas ornaments, and hundreds of related Christian gifts honoring the birthplace of Jesus. A British man staying at the Lutheran Hospice in Jerusalem's Old Quarter told me before the

intifada began in September 2000, there used to be 3,000 tourists a day visiting the historic Church of the Nativity.

Whatever remaining tourist traffic there was in this holy city came to an abrupt end during a the five-week Israeli siege at the church in April and May 2002, when Palestinian radicals were holed up and surrounded by Israeli forces. The Israelis killed seven of the occupiers and wounded another 40.

Several visitors were visible at midday when I entered the 1,400-year-old building, supposedly built over the grottos that mark the spot where the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus. The exterior resembled a massive stone box. Light filtered in through the windows, illuminating the remaining Byzantine mosaics inside.

Aside from the Greek and Armenian Orthodox caretakers of the church that I saw, I counted only three tourists in the Church of the Nativity and the other adjacent structure, the Church of St. Catherine, administered by the Franciscans. Only one elderly woman tourist was within the grotto, beneath the altar, the reputed manger birthplace of Christ. She was prostrate, kissing the shrine that was illuminated in candles.

I couldn't help but compare this sight with the scene that was about to happen in Mecca, Islam's holiest city. The Hajj was beginning two days out. In Mecca, nearly 2 million Muslims would gather in pilgrimage, the ultimate affirmation of their faith. The scene of humanity would be so dense around the most sacred location for all of Islam, the Kaaba stone, that a virtual sea of bodies would flow around it for the required seven circumambulations.

And here in Bethlehem, arguably one of the two most sacred sites in all of Christendom, I could count the visitors on one hand. Clearly, the spiritual center for Islam's monotheistic rival was no longer in the place of its origin.

The bus bombings and other attacks on Israelis by Palestinian hardliners as well as daily reports of killings in the Occupied Territories

obviously were scaring away tourists from Israel, the main entry point to Palestinian lands. For its part, the State of Israel had made it nearly impossible for any visitor to cross into areas administered by the nearly functionless Palestinian Authority. Not that many tourists would want to visit Gaza or the West Bank, but the Occupied Territories were all but officially off limits.

The entry card given to me at Ben-Gurion airport, with writing in English and Arabic, said visitors were forbidden from entering all territories administered by the Palestinian Authority, the Gaza Strip, Judea, and Samaria—or virtually all the Occupied Territories—without prior written approval.

“Entry into the aforementioned territories, without prior authorization, may result in legal measures being taken against you, including deportation and refusal of future re-entry into the State of Israel,” warned the slip.

Why would any visitor, Christian or otherwise, jump through this hoop. The Israelis knew this. The card was clearly directed to relatives of Palestinians living abroad, to journalists, to would-be journalists, and to foreign human-rights activists who had taken up the cause of the Palestinian people.

My own hunch is that Israeli security personnel view non-Jewish travelers, particularly those from Europe or the United States, as possible activists with groups like Human Rights Watch or the left-leaning International Solidarity Movement, or ISM. The latter has opposed Israel’s demolition of homes of supposed terrorists with direct action, leading to fatal consequences and embarrassments for Israel.

In the year prior to my visit, Tom Hurndall, a 21-year-old British activist, was shot in the head by Israelis in Gaza trying to help a child during a protest. He died nine months later on Jan. 14, 2004, after lying in a coma since his injury. Rachel Corrie, a student from Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, about an hour south of Seattle, was run over and killed in Gaza by an Israeli bulldozer on March 16, 2003, while trying to prevent a Palestinian home

from being demolished. The news coverage shocked many Americans.

Far from the Middle East, I had avoided taking sides in debates over Israel and the Palestinians. Though I was no Hurndall or Corrie, here in the Holy Lands I was finding it was impossible not take a position on the dispute that all Holy Lands visitors repeatedly have shoved in their face.

In the eyes of Bethlehem’s Christian shopkeepers, I was not a partisan ally. To them I was potential customer, and they pleaded with me to come into their empty stores. Many stores in the city already were bolted shut, particularly near the checkpoint on the main road from Jerusalem. I had no idea how anyone in the city could make a living.

I walked back to the checkpoint, stopping first at Jarez’s shop to let him know my trip failed.

“So, you have now seen for yourself how we live here,” he said. “We live in a jail. It is terrible.”

The last four blocks to the checkpoint were empty. One four-story building had been seized by Israel Defense Forces and turned into a watch post. The Israelis put an armed compound on the Palestinian side of the checkpoint, with 15-foot walls and barbed wire.

Barbed wire defenses lay all around the checkpoint, which sits atop the crest of a tall hillside. A ditch about four feet deep cut through the olive grove next to the road, where the wall was scheduled to be added. I saw three armored personnel carriers whiz by.

At the checkpoint, two Israelis sat in the metal cage, one an Ethiopian Jewish soldier reading the Torah. I presented my passport and entry card. The second soldier looked at me and then waved me back. He didn’t seem to care that I was an American tourist. After a few questions, he then let me through. So much for Israel’s policy preventing tourists from visiting the West Bank without written permission.

Walking back to the main road, I heard ambulances. Two had rushed to the checkpoint. There was some commotion when

two of the armored personnel carriers had returned. Some bodies were moved to the two ambulances, which sped away. I heard yelling in Hebrew and Arabic. Later that night I learned a Palestinian man had been shot and a pregnant woman had been beaten by Israeli soldiers, according to a version of events provided by a foreign teacher at my hotel in the Old City.

Back in Jerusalem, I waited for a public bus, one operated by Egged.

These are the buses that have been targeted by suicide bombers. One stopped for me. The driver carefully looked me over for a few seconds, then opened the door. Inside were old ladies. A security guard with an earpiece receiver and gun boarded three stops later and stared everyone down. He rode several stops and got off.

I told myself I wouldn't ride these public buses, but here I was, exposed like all other residents to a possible attack. Rationally, I knew that my chances of being killed were small. Driving on Israel's highways was more dangerous. But, I was gripped by an irrational fear that clearly was rooted in racism. I think that fear was shared by my elderly fellow passengers, every day of the year. Admittedly, I was looking for young Palestinian passengers who appeared nervous. Yet, the Jewish and Palestinian passengers alike seemed so ordinary.

My insecurity was hardly irrational. Another Egged bus in Jerusalem was blown up by an al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade suicide bomber on Feb.



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Christian pilgrims like those seen here, inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, are staying away from Israel because of fears of suicide bombers. Tourist traffic in the Holy City has slowed to a virtual trickle since the intifada began in September 2000.

23, killing nine people, including the bomber, and wounding more than 50 persons less than two weeks after I left Israel. Like many previous attacks, this one was reportedly in retaliation, in this case to the Israeli's killing of 12 Palestinians in a gunfight in Gaza on Feb. 12.

Following my aborted trip to Mar Saba, I spent more time in Jerusalem's one-square-kilometer-square Old City. The stone-paved quarter was forcefully seized by Israel during the Six Day War of 1967. Israel eventually annexed the area into greater Jerusalem and later called the city its capital. The annexation enraged Arab nations and Muslims the world over, and the seizure hardened Israel's own increasingly fanatical religious zealots. For its part, the United Nations passed Resolution 242 in November 1967 that called for the "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict." The 1993 Oslo Accords specified that "final status" talks on Jerusalem would occur in the future.

My own gut feeling, having read the news and

having seen the city, was that Israel would never willingly abandon its firm hold on this holy place—now that a quarter of the city was home to mostly Orthodox Jews. Given the global rise of anti-Jewish violence in the past half decade, I seriously doubt any Israeli government would willingly abandon a place with the holiest of holy Jewish shrines and homes of Jewish residents.

Police and soldiers guard all the gates to the Old City. Every time I passed by a gate, particularly Damascus Gate in the Arab Quarter, I saw young Palestinian men being questioned by the soldiers. Even I was questioned when I stumbled on a hidden guard post near the Temple Mount.

The humiliation Palestinians feel during the procedures is palpable. The degradation I saw was strongest on my second-to-last day in Israel, when I made my second foray to Mar Saba on Feb. 8.

A day earlier, an Israeli missile strike in Gaza killed two men and two child bystanders, in retaliation to the Jerusalem bus bombing on Jan. 29. Security was ratcheted up. Helicopters buzzed overhead in the morning, and random road blocks had been thrown up around the Old City.

Palestinians in Jerusalem said the curfew in Bethlehem had been lifted, but that I would need to enter the city via Beit Jala, a suburb community with no security post. Palestinians do this by picking up mini buses by the Damascus Gate. I boarded a bus with 10 Palestinian passengers, including women and children.

As we headed toward the Old City's Jaffa Gate, we were stopped by the Israeli military. A woman soldier in olive greens demanded all of our IDs, presumably because the bus was bound to Palestinian areas.

I heard a loud, almost painful groan come from everyone. One could feel a collective sinking feeling that accompanied this process. I do not know if any passenger was a security risk; I presume most people were simply going about their lives. These security measures clearly

were taking a psychological toll on innocent Palestinian people.

After five minutes of waiting, the soldier returned our IDs, and we drove off. There was some Arabic muttering I couldn't understand.

I exited the bus at Beit Jala, a nondescript town next to Bethlehem, and walked up a small hill to a crowd of taxi drivers, who were waiting. There was no barbed-wire post here, like Bethlehem's main entrance. My driver, a Muslim Palestinian, Mustafa, charged me double the local rate, saying he had a family of seven and barely no business.

Back at Jarez's shop, Jonathan was called and again I was on the same road, passing by Shepherds' Field and, to my delight, the intersection where we were turned around by soldiers a week earlier. We saw a construction site that was fenced off. Jonathan said it was another settlement being built. "This is on Palestinian land," he said.

Soon, we were driving through hilly, scrubby land that felt as if it was embraced by the clear blue skies above. Only a few sheds of Bedouin residents could be seen, with an occasional herd of sheep in what historically has been known as the Judean Wilderness.

Then, suddenly, we saw Mar Saba, peering slightly out of the Wadi Qadron valley, solitary and lonely like the land around it.

The sturdy stone structure, slightly yellow in color, is built onto a cliff face over a dry valley. The monastery's enormous stone walls were built to keep out invaders and thieves, a persistent threat throughout the centuries. It is self-sufficient religious bunker, with its own well. Inside sits an elegant but small Greek Orthodox basilica, with the leathery and mostly skeletal remains of the founder, Saint Sabas, in a small glass case, dressed in a robe, complete with a headpiece on his skull.

A native of the Cappadocia region in Turkey, Sabas was an ascetic monk who settled in the area in 483 at a time of intense Christian monastic ferment in the region. Holy men were seeking to connect with God by living in

extreme isolation and privation. Remains of scores of hermit cave dwellings are visible in the wadi outside the monastery, on the opposing cliff walls. Today, the surrounding barren hills are largely empty.

Another Mar Saba chapel, built inside a natural cave grotto, contains skeletal remains of more than 40 Christian monks who were martyred here during a violent Persian conquest in 614—the first of several bloody assaults on the complex. The relics of St. Sabas, which had been taken to Venice in the Crusader era, were returned to Mar Saba by Pope Paul VI in 1965.

An American-born Greek Orthodox monk gave Jonathan and myself a brief tour, to these two places of worship. We were joined by a group of three Italian men and their two Palestinian guides.

The Italians and I talked about Israeli travel restrictions that all of us violated to come here. I said these measures were to prevent future Rachel Corrie-type activists from helping Palestinians. When asked by one of the Italian men who she was, I said she was a leftie college student from a nearby town where I lived, who perhaps was trying to save the world. One of the two Palestinian men disagreed and called her a hero who was trying to prevent Israeli oppression in

the Gaza.

The tour over, I walked down to the Wadi, below the monastery, which loomed above like a castle. A stream of raw sewage flowed by, carrying away the waste from Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Even with the foul smell, it was a



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The Monastery of Mar Saba rises like a jewel in the Judean Wilderness. Though geographically close to Jerusalem, getting to the sanctuary, however, proved nearly impossible due to continuing hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians. Israel's near closure of the Occupied Territories to foreign visitors also prevents travelers from reaching the ancient site. In February 2004, visitors who came to this part of the Occupied Territories without written permission from Israeli officials could have faced possible deportation.

peaceful place, and I could see why men attempting to commune with God would want to come here.

Jonathan and I drove back to Bethlehem, then to the taxi stop at Beit Jala. Mustafa, my earlier taxi driver, was there too.

“Why did you hire this Christian,” he said. “You are not a good person. This is no good. No good.” Several of his fellow taxi drivers nodded approvingly.

Wonderful, I thought, the Palestinians’ resentment against Israelis, which often took a visceral anti-Semitic flavor, could even be eclipsed by the antagonism between Christian and Muslim Palestinians. Mustafa knew I was American, and I suspected he thought I was Jewish, as the Christian Jarez had done. It wasn’t a good situation. Luckily I joined two friendly Palestinian Muslim women on the street. In nearly perfect English they told me they also were waiting for the bus to Jerusalem.

Minutes later a mini bus for Jerusalem arrived. We were stopped on a bridge by an Israeli checkpoint. I was worried now, as it was clear that I had probably just come from Beit Jala. The soldier, instead, asked me why I had come to Israel and when I had arrived. He glanced at my documents and then waved us on. Once more I was surprised how little the foot soldiers cared about unauthorized visits to the West Bank.

For my 5 a.m. flight the next morning, I took a shared bus taxi to the airport with three Spanish Jewish teens, a Hasidic Jewish family, and two older Jewish men. Upon entering the gate of Ben-Gurion airport, six stern-faced men stood poised and ready with automatic weapons at the entrance. This is supposedly the safest airport in the world.

After we unloaded by the passenger check-in area, I was the only passenger stopped by a security guard. After several questions, a second agent questioned me for 10 minutes. It was similar to the interrogations I received arriving here, and crossing back into Israel from al Aqabah, Jordan, after my quick trip to historic Petra.

That I had once traveled to Rwanda and Vietnam, and to Jordan on this trip, concerned him, I think. I can’t fault him for that. But, I was annoyed that the only non-Jewish person in the bus came under scrutiny. That I had camera equipment suggested I was a reporter, which I denied.

“You are not afraid of terrorism?”

“No,” I answered. “But, I am afraid of Israeli drivers.”

He relented after I produced my business card, showing I worked for the Canadian government.

Inside, I had six more interviews—two more than most travelers I saw. My belongings were X-rayed, as was everyone’s. Every inch of my luggage was swabbed to look for trace residue of explosives, which was also standard procedure. And then my carry-on luggage was X-rayed again, after clearing passport control. In the process, a guard lost one of my rolls of film from Jordan.

I was frisked and pulled aside one more time. This was special treatment; only a Japanese man in my area received the same scrutiny. This time the explosives residue swabbing included my money belt the inside of my pants—by the same agent who had conducted the search earlier.

The Japanese tourist and I chatted briefly, in the final boarding area. Though I didn’t share my thoughts with him, I wrote them down, still angry because of the special scrutiny that appeared to have nothing to do with security and everything to do with my ethnicity and the possibility that I had come to Israel to report on the problems there.

Ultimately, I did write about my travels to try to understand the problems a little better. I also took a position. In my final journey entry, written on the flight leaving Jerusalem, I wrote: “I’m not certain what I’ll say to the folks back home. I’ll inevitably be called anti-Semitic for blasting Israeli racism, but hey, it has to be called for what it is.”