

***Behind the Lines in the West Bank:  
A journalist reports from the Middle East***

A Speech by

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I'm going to talk about Israel today and what I saw there when I went on a reporting trip last month. . But of course it's impossible to ignore Iraq so I thought I'd start out with an eyewitness account (not mine) from Baghdad.

It's from an ex- human shield. His name is Daniel Pepper. He's a 23-year old Jewish American living in London and here's what he wrote yesterday in the Telegraph.

I was shocked when I first met a pro-war Iraqi in Baghdad - a taxi driver taking me back to my hotel late at night. I explained that I was American and said, as we shields always did, "Bush bad, war bad, Iraq good". He looked at me with an expression of incredulity.

As he realized I was serious, he slowed down and started to speak in broken English about the evils of Saddam's regime. Until then I had only heard the President spoken of with respect, but now this guy was telling me how all of Iraq's oil money went into Saddam's pocket and that if you opposed him politically he would kill your whole family.

It scared the hell out of me. First I was thinking that maybe it was the secret police trying to trick me but later I got the impression that he wanted me to help him escape. I felt so bad. I told him: "Listen, I am just a schmuck from the United States, I am not with the UN, I'm not with the CIA - I just can't help you."

(Eventually the shields leave Iraq and take a taxi to Jordan with another driver.) He says: "Don't you listen to Powell on Voice of America radio?" We WANT America to bomb Saddam."

We just sat, listening, our mouths open wide. Jake, one of the others, just kept saying, "Oh my God" as the driver described the horrors of the regime. ...Perhaps the most crushing thing we learned was that most ordinary Iraqis thought Saddam Hussein had paid us to come to protest in Iraq. Although we explained that this was categorically not the case, I don't think he believed us. Later he asked me: "Really, how much did Saddam pay you to come?"

And that's how one human shield changed his mind.

Interestingly, the people who are least conflicted about this war are the Israelis. When I was in Israel they were already going to the shopping mall to get their gas masks updated, and they were already going to Home Depot to get the tape and plastic sheeting you need to prepare a safe room in your house. They'd already had experience dodging Saddam's Scuds, and they knew that if he ever

is able to unleash his WMDs, they're first on the list. He has said for years that he wants to destroy "the Zionist entity."

People often ask if I'm Jewish...the answer is no. So why does Israel matter? It matters because it lies on the fault line between the Arab world and the western world, and its conflicts are now the conflicts that have reached us all.

The extraordinary thing about Israel is that the line isn't imaginary. It's real, and it's everywhere. It's in the middle of the street, where Jerusalem is on one side and the West Bank is on the other. It's right over there, just a block away. Imagine a village that begins a block or two away, where every so often people decide to shoot at you. That's Israel.

And what you also find out is that it's a looking glass world. On each side of the line you find a completely different version of reality.

On one side of the line, 1948 was a miracle, the fulfillment of a 2000 year old dream for a displaced people. On the other side, 1948 is known by everyone as el nakbah – the catastrophe. On one side, suicide bombers are known as terrorists. On the other side, they are universally known as martyrs.

People always ask how I got around in the West Bank and the answer is that The Globe has a great person there, a Palestinian woman named Nuha. She's what's called a fixer, and she can fix up anything for you. She also knows how to sneak around the checkpoints, thus saving a lot of time. And so I asked Nuha for something I thought would be almost impossible. Could I go meet the family of a suicide bomber? Could I go into that person's world and try to get into her head?

And Nuha right away said yes, I know the exact family, we will go meet the family of Ayat al Akras.

And this is the girl I wrote about in the Globe and Mail.

When you think of what a terrorist looks like, you wouldn't think of Ayat. She was 17 years old, a very lovely girl, very serious, a top student, with her entire future ahead of her. She was engaged to be married, and had made her fiancé promise that she could continue her education and go to college. She wanted to become a journalist.

On the evening of March 28, last year, she helped her mother cook dinner for her future in-laws. Then she stayed up late studying for an exam. The next morning she went to school, said hello to all her friends, and took the exam. Then she disappeared.

She changed out of her school uniform and, with someone's help, she strapped a belt of explosives around her waist. Then she slipped across the line from the West Bank to Jerusalem. She caught a taxi (which had been arranged for her) and the driver took her along a well-travelled highway to a shopping mall in a town just outside Jerusalem. It was early Friday afternoon, which is peak shopping time in Israel because everyone is getting ready for Shabbas.

Every store has a security guard these days and something about her alarmed the guard. He blocked her way into the store and then he threw himself in front of her as she blew herself up. He no doubt saved dozens of lives.

But Ayat did manage to kill him, as well as herself. There was one other victim – a girl named Rachel Levy, who had gone out on an errand for her mother.

And Rachel, too, was 17. She too was in her last year of high school, and was an excellent scholar. She even looked like Ayat.

In another world, these girls could have been friends. They could have been cousins. In fact, they only lived a few miles from each other. That's how intimate the enemy is in Israel.

So Nuha and I went off to visit Ayat's family. And the first thing we did was stop off to buy a box of candy, because her parents were getting ready to go to Mecca on a Hajj, and it's appropriate to take a present to celebrate such a grand event.

And then we drove to Deheishah, a refugee camp just beyond Bethlehem, which is in the West Bank and is predominantly Arab. And on the way there you could see Jewish settlements everywhere. There are hundreds of thousands of settlers now.

Both the term "settlement" and the term "refugee camp" are very deceptive. I imagined something like Tent city, or a trailer camp, something very provisional and temporary. Not so. The settlements we passed were quite pleasant modern suburbs, with brand-new highways connecting them to Jerusalem so that the "settlers" wouldn't have to go through Arab villages on their way to work. And the refugee camps are also very solid. They have concrete houses and concrete streets and schools and stores. They are much poorer than the "settlements." But they're even older. Most of them have been there for 50 years, and the people who live there are the children and grandchildren of the original "refugees."

In Deheishah, Ayat is a hero. There are posters of her everywhere, with the photo she had taken just before she died, where she is wearing the warrior's kaffiyeh and holding a gun. The first person we met in Deheishah was a cousin of hers, who has a little shop. He's 26, and he walks with a limp. One hand is crippled, and he has a crease in his head where an Israeli soldier shot him a few years ago.

Every Palestinian has a relative like this. Every Palestinian has a cousin, son or brother who's been shot or thrown in jail by the Israelis. Every Palestinian has felt the personal humiliation of the checkpoints and has suffered from the collapse of the economy since Israel basically shut them off in the West Bank or Gaza two and a half years ago. Their lives have become much, much worse. And no matter what the justification for all of this, they experience it as collective punishment.

Ayat was born in a two-room concrete house. Her parents raised 11 children there. Their living room is rather small and very neat, filled with matching upholstered furniture, and they have turned it into a sort of shrine to her. There were two pictures of her side by side that I will never forget. One is the martyr picture she had taken of herself in kaffiyeh with the gun. And the other is shot of her in western dress, and she's smiling instead of looking serious, and there's a studio backdrop....the skyline of Manhattan.

And to me, those pictures summed up Ayat's choice. She had a choice between the future and the past, the west and the east, modernism and....the gun. She had two worlds to choose from. And she chose the wrong one.

Her father told me that after she died, he went to get her exam from school. She got a perfect mark – 20 out of 20.

Ayat's mother served us tea and told me about her daughter. Ayat had become very upset when a neighbour of theirs right across the street was killed by the Israeli army. That radicalized her. But she never spoke of it. Once, when she and her mother were watching the news together, she expressed sympathy for a suicide bomber, and her mother warned her such matters were none of her business. But Ayat was very stubborn, very persistent. She got in touch with the local terrorist group in the camp, the Al-Aksa Brigades, and volunteered for a suicide mission. At first they turned her down. But she kept insisting, and finally they said yes.

I asked her parents if they felt sorry for the innocent people she had killed. I asked if they felt bitter about the people who had recruited her. Her mother said yes, she felt very sorry for Rachel and her family, and yes, she did blame the people who had recruited her. How could they possibly go behind a mother's back? Was the way she put it. She even blamed Arafat. She said that since he came, he had brought nothing but misery.

But her father disagreed. He refused to blame Arafat. And he refused to blame the people who had recruited her. He blamed everything on Sharon, who had driven the Palestinian people to desperation.

Afterwards, on the street, we met one of Ayat's school friends, a girl dressed in spangled jeans and platform shoes. I asked her what she thought of Ayat. She said: "I wouldn't have the courage to do what she did."

But, I said, what she did was murder. And the girl said, I know Ayat, she was doing it for the children, she would never commit murder.

Then we went to Ayat's high school, which is a large, modern, airy building with a sweeping view of the hills of Jerusalem. The principal wasn't supposed to let us in, but she did. And the first thing we saw was a giant mural of Ayat shown in her martyr's kaffiyeh, in the front hall of the school.

And I asked the principal, what do people think of her? And the principal said, she's a hero in this community.

There was another parent there. He said that the death of innocent civilians upsets him very much. But the Palestinians have become desperate. If innocent Israelis die, it's Israel's fault.

It was the response I heard over and over again. And when I went back across the line to the Israel side, people would always ask me: Don't they see the connection between the terrorism and the checkpoints? the terrorism and the walls? The terrorism and the tanks? And the answer is no.

Yasser Arafat keeps pledging to restrain the terror. But since September of 2000, shortly after the collapse of the Camp David talks, suicide terrorism has been his weapon of choice. Not only that, I learned, the PA has a widespread propaganda campaign to recruit people like Ayat.

It all started when Arafat realized that dead children make good propaganda. The most famous child shahid, or martyr, is a 12-year-old boy named Muhammad al-Dura, who died on Sept. 30, 2000. The Palestinians claimed he'd been shot by Israeli soldiers, and video footage of the dead child was broadcast around the world. It turned out that he hadn't been, but the damage was done, and the images inflicted terrible damage on Israel's reputation.

The Palestinians made a video glorifying his death, which has been played countless times on official PA TV. The purpose of the video is to encourage other children to regard him as a role model.

In the video, a young actor portraying the dead boy calls upon more children to share his fate. The tape opens with a full-screen message in Arabic that reads, "I am waving to you not to part, but to say follow me, " specifically to Paradise. Paradise is depicted as a fun-filled place with amusement parks, kites and beaches.

This video and many others like it have aired hundreds of times. Sometimes the parents are depicted, tearful but happy that their children have fallen as martyrs.

Now, when Palestinians use the word martyr, they don't distinguish between someone who works for Hamas, and a child who's been killed by accident. Everyone killed by the Israelis is referred to as a martyr.

A few months after Ayat died, there was a new video. It featured a pretty teenage girl in military dress, singing as teenagers dance and throw stones in the background. "I will even willingly fall as a shaheed!" she sings.

The kids have bought the message. Last July, Palestinian TV broadcast an interview with two bright, well spoken 11 year old girls. Both of them expressed their longing for martyrdom. "Shahada is very beautiful," said one. "Everyone yearns for Shahada. What could be better than going to Paradise?"

The host asks, "What is better, peace and full rights for the Palestinian people, or shahada?" And the girl answers, "Shahada. I will achieve my rights after becoming a shahida.

What's significant about this propaganda is that it is not promoting a political objective. It is not telling teenagers to die in order to achieve a Palestinian state. Martyrdom is an end in itself. They are selling kids on something far more powerful than a political objective. They are selling a fantasy ideology. The same kind of fantasy ideology that drove the hijackers to crash airplanes into the Twin Towers and drove Saddam to acquire his weapons.

But the suicide bombing strategy has been a miserable failure for the Palestinians. The Israelis were not driven back to the negotiating table. Instead they cracked down hard. And the crackdown has shut off most of the suicide attacks. There have been only two successful ones so far this year, despite hundreds of attempts.

The supermarket Ayat bombed is as busy as ever. So are the busses and the discos. And life goes on with surprising normalcy.

So Ayat died for nothing. She might have seen Manhattan one day, and she died for nothing.

And Arafat completely miscalculated. He thought that terrorism would drive Israelis back to the Labour party, and the Labour party would revive the peace process. Instead, people repudiated the Labour party and elected Ariel Sharon, because even though they don't like him he promised not to negotiate under fire. He promised that security would come first. Even some people who voted Labour in this election told me they secretly hoped Sharon would win.

I think in many ways George Bush is the Ariel Sharon of the western world.

Now I should say two things right here. First, there is no doubt that the current situation is soul-destroying for both sides. Israel too has been coarsened by the occupation. And it is essential for the Palestinians to have their own state. But the next time you hear someone insist that the Americans should just ride right in with their road map and knock heads together and just make them all come to their senses, think of the story of Ayat. Anyone can make peace on a piece of paper. Making peace on the ground is infinitely more difficult, because for that you have to change hearts and minds and the entire psychology of a people.

Israelis understand very well the links between Saddam and al Qaeda and the terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and the Al-Aqsa martyrs brigade that operate on their own borders and throughout the occupied territories. The most important links are not the weapons they share, but the goals. All these groups want to extinguish the state of Israel and preferably the United States and the entire West as well. Their objectives are not political. Their objectives are ideological. There is nothing we can offer that will satisfy them, no concession we can make that will appease them. All of them engage in a murderous fantasy ideology whose objective is the annihilation of the enemy.

The last thing terrorists want is a practical solution. It would be a catastrophe for them. For large parts of the Muslim world, including Saddam's Iraq, Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, the Palestinian revolt is a proxy war with the United States. And Palestine as a symbol works best when Palestine the place is burning.

Things have been mixed for Ayat's family in the past year. Their two oldest sons were picked up by the Israelis and thrown into jail. The army tried to tear their house down, which is the usual punishment for the families of suicide bombers. But they hired a Jewish lawyer and took the army to court, and Israel's supreme court ruled in favour of the family because the house couldn't be torn down without damaging the houses on either side. They never did get to Mecca. The Israelis wouldn't let them go. It turned out that their trip was an all expenses paid luxury tour offered by the Saudis to all the martyr's families. They did get money from Saddam Hussein though – the standard amount is \$25,000. One of the things he did last week before he disappeared from view was to speed up his payments to the Palestinian martyrs' families.

The war against Saddam Hussein and the low-level war that Israel has been fighting for the past 55 years have a common element. Reason, and negotiations, and weapons inspections, and diplomacy have very little chance of resolving the matter --- so long as the leaders on the other side believe they can get rid of you.

And now, I'm afraid, we all live in the same kind of world the Israelis do. That was the message of Sept. 11, although some people haven't heard it yet. In the global village, even Saddam Hussein is right next door.

I remember my last night in Israel, where I was having dinner with some friends in a nice little café in the middle of Jerusalem, and it was a quiet peaceful lovely night, and it could have been Toronto – except it was way too warm. And two of the couples there – including one woman from Canada -- had kids in the army. And one of the fathers said something I will never forget. "What makes this evening possible," he said, "is that three miles from here, a group of 20-year-olds are standing guard for us."

And I felt a little like the ex-human shield, who found out that when you get up close, it all looks very different.

Thank you.