

Palestine revisited: Za'atara

I was the first writer on the scene. Most of these villages, including Artas and Nahalin, remain closed military areas, making it extremely difficult for the press to investigate. But the growing reality is that most of the press has been sufficiently intimidated by the Israeli restrictions, difficulties, film confiscations, and problems brought about by Israelis masquerading as press that most of what's going on is now unreported. The press has grown somewhat lazy and tired of the Israeli tactics

Cry of another quiet village

FEW who read this will have ever heard of the village of Za'atara. It's a very quiet place in the beautiful but desolate hills overlooking the Dead Sea. It's a farming village with simple stone houses, shepherds grazing their sheep and goats, a small central mosque that rises into the sky, a single phone that doesn't work.

But there are about 10,000 people here, and symbols of what they term the struggle for "their rights", for their dignity, for their national independence as Palestinians, can be seen everywhere.

Even though the Israeli army busies itself all the time forcing the villagers at gunpoint to whitewash slogans from the walls and pull down the Palestinian flags that fly everywhere from the electric wires overhead, the Palestinian Intifada is proving impossible to extinguish in places like Za'atara.

I spent a morning talking to the villagers about what had happened a few days before on the first day of the feast marking the end of Ramadan.

As I left, the only man who spoke passable English came up to me and told me I was the only journalist who had come to the village since what had happened. He looked me in the eye, took my hand firmly, thanked me for

coming to see what was happening to them, and asked me very courteously to tell the American people what I had seen and to ask them for fairness and justice.

The Intifada is the most real and most vivid in an out of the way place like Za'atara. Here the escalating confrontation between the heavily armed Israeli troops and the totally unarmed simple Palestinians is at its natural, raw, uncompromised reality.

Like in so many other Palestinian villages and towns the Israelis are trying every tactic to quite literally shoot and beat the Palestinians into submission and to squeeze the life out of the nationalist struggle.

Eid day raid

On the first day of the feast, the very holy Muslim holiday of Eid Al-Fitr, May 6, about 300 Israeli troops along with the infamous "Border Police" who act more like Storm Troopers than police, descended on Za'atara.

For the next four and a half hours a "pogrom" ensued. By the time they had left 10 villagers had been shot with "live bullets", double that number had been injured by so-called "rubber bullets" (in reality a heavy and sometimes lethal metal marble coated with

a tough plastic and shot at high velocity), many more injured by beatings, and at least 50 people had passed out and required medical treatment because of tremendous use of highly potent forms of teargas.

When I was there, apparently the first writer on the scene, the villagers were still smarting from the teargas. The third gas-induced miscarriage actually told place while I was visiting the village.

Evidence of what had happened was everywhere — even though the Israeli army now takes steps to try to cover up its tracks, steps that include gathering up spent cartridges and cannisters. Still, so much was used that teargas cartridges and grenades littered some areas and people wanting to show their wounds came forward all the time.

The stories the villagers told were very consistent and believable. Furthermore, I had heard similar stories in other villagers in recent weeks.

For a hundred injured is not usual these days in Palestinian villages.

Just a day after the pogrom in Za'atara more than 120 persons were reported injured and two deaths occurred in the Gaza Strip. And in Bethlehem where I spent the rest of the day a 12-year-old was shot to death and at least 15

others seriously injured.

A few days before that, as I've written about in a previous column, the village of Nahalin suffered five deaths and many injuries when Border Police shot indiscriminately with machineguns and jeep-mounted heavy weapons as villagers came out the mosque early in the morning getting ready to fast.

And a few days after that a force of some 2,000 soldiers descended on the small village of Artas, blew up five homes, and injured scores of persons.

Closed areas

As I write, most of these villages, including Artas and Nahalin, remain closed military areas making it extremely difficult for the press to investigate even if they wanted to. But the press too has grown somewhat lazy and tired as Israeli tactics wear them down as well.

Furthermore, the growing reality is that most of the press has been sufficiently intimidated by the restrictions, difficulties, film confiscations, and problems brought about by Israelis masquerading as press, that unless particularly gruesome events take place, most of what is going on is now unreported. My own rough estimate would be that while most deaths are

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eventually recorded injuries are running many times the official figures.

Though Saturday May 6 will be remembered in Za'atara as the day of the pogrom they are quite literally in danger from the Israelis all the time. On a hill overlooking the city the Israelis have in place a military intelligence camp which uses huge binoculars and the most sophisticated listening equipment to keep track of Palestinians in all the surrounding villages and towns.

As one walks through Za'atara there are about three dozens destroyed buildings. These are homes the Israelis have blown up since the Intifada began, usually in the middle of the night — a tactic designed to convince Palestinians to be acquiescent and to keep their children the same way. For if a child is found throwing stones, or if some informer should even accuse someone of doing something to protest against the occupation, a family has to worry, even expect, that the army will come in the middle of the night and, with but a few moments notice, destroy their home.

So while the diplomats converse and rhetorical speeches are made the reality is that the human misery is still rising in occupied Palestine, and so is the hatred.

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