

TROUBLE EVERY DAY

Martyrs, murderers and the end of innocence: Dazed takes a trip through Palestine

I'm looking down the barrel of an Israeli soldier's gun, thinking – strangely, stupidly – “don't you fucking dare”. At which point he does... You don't see a bullet coming. You hear the crack of gunfire. For a millisecond the world stops. And that's it – you're either hit or, fortunately for me and the fleeing boys just in front of me, you're not.

We're lucky. This afternoon several young Palestinians are shot by Israeli “rubber” bullets – evil steel spheres coated with a thin rubber layer. As a waiting ambulance dives in, the photographers swarm and, cradled in a medic's arms, a boy's head rolls back, two thin streams of blood flowing round his nose. A neat, black hole punctures his forehead: a charred full stop.

Later that night in hospital he will die, his elder brother raging for the second sibling he's lost this year. That night on the Israeli news, like so many Palestinians children before him, his death will not even be mentioned. The events of the afternoon will briefly be referred to as “a stone-throwing incident”.

In the past two hours in Ramallah I've seen some things. The excitement and fear as a group of perhaps 20 boys, some of them no more than eight, taunt Israeli tanks and armoured jeeps with stones and jeers... The Israelis respond with tear gas, stun grenades and bullets... Children – some smiling beautiful disbelieving smiles as our ears ring wit the boom of the grenades, others with stern and angry faces of bitter old men – they're the one's it's hardest to watch, their bravery pushing them closer to death, their young faces animated by nothing but cold hate.

And in this fucked-up, ugly place, strange, almost beautiful things happen. Ducking into a house, eyes streaming with tear gas, a man leads us to his garage and sprays soothing air from a car pump into our faces. When his immaculately dressed wife comes down the stairs, bleary-eyed and yelling at him, he – and then all of us, including her – start laughing hysterically. Outside, the gas, grenades and stones continue to fly. As another black shape shoots overhead we all duck instinctively. It's a swallow. One of the most fearless of the boys is barely four foot tall; as he repeatedly runs into the line of fire, his pea-green towelling tracksuit makes him look like a slingshot-wielding Teletubby. Metres from the fighting, a man unloads precariously stacked trays of eggs from his car. There's a huge heart-stopping bang right next to us. He doesn't even flinch. Stone throwers crouch behind a rubble bank, taking cover after recent volley. One of their targets, an armoured jeep, suddenly screeches to the top of the bank, the door flies open and a soldier fires at the scattering boys. As he does this, he laughs; a joyless, crazed, inhuman shriek.

But mostly I saw kids – dumb, brave, angry kids – throwing stones at tanks and, as they ran away, I watched soldiers take aim and shoot at



martyr

them. Kids. Armed only with stones. Running away. And like almost everyone – here and around the world – I looked on and did nothing.

“Here, you see so much. Every day there killing”, says Said, 27, observing the mayhem from the end of the street. “You see old men, children, women die. Everyone knows someone killed... you stop feeling.” The only thing that makes sense here is the tear gas. We fucking should cry.

We came to Ramallah to look at Israeli PM Ariel Sharon’s latest piece of handiwork. In a pre-dawn raid, his troops had firebombed the headquarters of the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation; not for the first time he was trying to destroy their independent TV and the radio station, The Voice of Palestine. He had also tightened his siege of Yasser Arafat’s HQ. The chaos and murder of that afternoon took place in the shadow of Arafat’s compound; the Palestinian children left to fight his battles for him.

We had come directly from Gaza, where we’d witnessed a more routine brutality that was equally destructive and counter productive. Over the years, the Gaza Strip has trickled into western consciousness as a wasteland of war and terrorists. Entering it through the eerily deserted Erez checkpoint (Israel has restricted the movement of Palestinians in and out of the strip to a bare minimum, curtailing terrorist activities but also preventing thousands of men from earning a living), the first thing you see is a billboard that reads: “Better have pains of peace than agonies of war”. Over the following days I’ll see my fair share of both.

As one BBC correspondent put it, Gaza is a land where “hope has died”. Nonetheless, in the past 50 years the 1.2 million Palestinians forced to live in this narrow, overpopulated strip of land (Gaza is a mere 40km by 6km) have built houses, roads, schools, universities and – with heartbreaking optimism – several hotels which are all but deserted. Generally, though, things are tatty and unfinished through lack of money and, perhaps, the persistent hope that all this is only temporary. The streets are a dusty mess of beat-up Mercedes (service cabs where eight or more people squeeze in to share the fare) and wayward donkeys and carts). Many of the roads and fields have been cut to pieces by the Israeli tanks’ latest “peace-keeping” incursions into Palestinian land.

We make straight for Rafa, at the southern tip of the territory and a near constant flash point between Israeli troops and Palestinians. It has recently – fleetingly – made the news after the Israeli demolition of over 70 houses (which it initially claimed were harbouring terrorist snipers, then said hid cross-border tunnels used to smuggle weapons). Although Israeli Foreign Minister (and former Prime Minister) Shimon Peres called the demolition “morally wrong” and “politically

counter-productive”, demolitions continue across the Palestinian territories.

One of the first things that hits you in Rafa – apart from the general squalor and the hordes of wild kids – is the ubiquitous graffiti. Every wall seems to be covered with political slogans, fly-posters and Death Metal-style pictures of grenades, explosions, daggers smiting the Star of David, eagles with machineguns in their talons...and strange pictures of stern-faced young men.

All these men are dead and everyone here, even the youngest child, knows their names. Across Gaza, we will see hundreds of these corpses staring back at us. These are the Shahid, or martyrs, killed in the intifada. They are a constant reminder of what Israel has done here, and for the Palestinians they are heroes.

Gaza is a place steeped in death. And every day, everywhere they turn, the hordes of children growing up here are, both physically and psychologically, looking up to dead people. The Sharhid are like rock stars, superheroes and saints all rolled into one; tragic role models for a generation without hope.

To the outsider, the kitsch love put into the posters (where they often resemble soft focus Rick Astley wannabes) and the array of fruity, Freddie Mercury ‘taches, makes them a surreal, almost comic spectacle. But for many of the people here, they’re all they have left – all that remains of their pride, dignity and hope. “Sharon destroys our homes, our future, he destroys human beings”, says 19-year old Ahmed. “But the Shahid will never die. He is alive in the sky. This is our religion. This is the truth.”

For a dispossessed, powerless people, symbols – of their pain, of their resistance – are everything. Ariel Sharon is acutely aware of this. His attempts to silence The Voice of Palestine, his recent destruction of the runway at Gaza’s all but unused International Airport (“if you have an airport you can fly anywhere, you are free,” says Hanni, an unemployed labourer) and the demolition of 700-plus Palestinian homes in the last 15 months are as damaging mentally as they are physically. “It’s very calculated,” says Jeff Halper, coordinator of the inspirational Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. “They’re all the symbols of independence and freedom.”

Walking round the dusty roads of Rafa and nearby Khan Yunis, “free” is the last thing you feel. At the end of most streets, there’s the ominous grey mass of an Israeli bunker, with thin black barrels protruding from dark observation slits. And whether the guns are being trained on you or not, the bullet-shredded building behind you put constantly on edge. “Everyone here has psychological problems” says Mohammed, a trainee nurse. “This is not a normal way to live. People

cannot live like this.” Following the Oslo Declaration, Gaza is, theoretically, part of a self-governing Palestinian homeland – it feels more like a huge prison camp.

But this constant pushing by Israel, this relentless humiliation and fear that have become the daily bread of these prisoners in their own land, only serves to intensify the bitterness and anger. Everyone here has experienced incredible suffering. There are so many tales of shooting, shelling, murder and mistreatment, so many wounds and scars to witness – a thousand shades of pain – you want to say, “Stop, I’ve heard enough.” But as long as the horror continues what right do we have to turn away? And amid this devastating array of misery, the psyche of the terrorist and the suicide bomber flourishes.

“The struggle of Palestinians today is how not to become how not to become a bomb,” says Dr. Eyad Sarraj, an eminent Palestinian psychiatrist. “The amazing thing is not the occurrence of suicide bombings, rather the rarity of them.

“Anger, political despair, the insult to this dignity, this is what makes a suicide bomber,” glorified. Your family is blessed. You become a prophet...What better reward for a humiliated defeated, helpless, hopeless person than to live in the arms of God?”

And for young people growing up in this culture of devalued life and glorious death, the atrocities committed against Israeli innocents in Hadera, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are justified with an unsettling logic: “every day you are attacked,” says Mustapha, a charismatic 18-year old student, “you lose your brother, your mother, your house. The main thing you want is to show that you can still fight. The bombers send a message: ‘Stop. We still have power.’ And the Israeli government really needs this message. Sharon doesn’t respect us, doesn’t respect our souls. We want peace, but it must be a fair peace. Israeli children should have the right to be safe, but Palestinian children don’t have this right. If Israeli people feel how we feel when our children die, then they will understand our pain. If just the Palestinians suffer, they will never know how we cry...and they will never want peace.”

Almost the last thing that hit me in Rafa was a rock. As I removed a blood-soaked hand from my head, the older boys scattered the anarchic swarm of children then took care of the cut. As often happens in this palace where under-18s make up 70 per cent of the population, things were getting alarmingly Lord of the Flies. “These children have grown up with the intifada,” the older ones apologised. “They have no rules.” Gaza is an unforgettable, compelling mix of horror and humanity, but it’s no place for a child to grow up. Later in Ramallah, Said will comment on the stone-throwing kids: “This is a bad education for our children.” Nurtured on violence and martyrdom, the youth, the future of Palestine, is in a precarious state.

This is not a political thesis, and, sadly it most certainly isn't news. In this seemingly perpetual conflict, life has become so devalued, death so mundane, that crushed homes and murdered children are now little more than statistics. No, this is a biased and thoroughly subjective account of life and death in the perversely named Holy Land. Sorry about that. If you want to find out more about the support (both political and economic) offered to Israel and its lapdog the UK...or the way Hamas and Islamic Jihad coldly manipulate the despair and idealism of intelligent young Palestinians to turn them into human bombs...or the desire for peace that stubbornly persists on both sides of the divide...or the saddening mess of good intentions and bad blood that has led to this never-ending war...you'll find plenty to read elsewhere.

But perhaps these are all things that we pretty much know. Maybe what we've forgotten is what it feels like to lose the thing that really keeps us alive: the people we love. To watch a life taken away, the crushing finality of the end. If we can remember that, project that, then perhaps we'll be moved to try to make a difference. Until then, it's all just hard journalism and hollow words.

Three days later I'm back in Ramallah. The rain is pouring down in great grey sheets. Two Shahid are being buried and the streets are heaving with hundreds of people paying their respects to these ghostly waxen figures carried among them. Occasionally, masked gunmen fire a deafening volley into the downpour and, ears ringing, little kids scramble at their feet for spent bullet casings. A man handling out posters of the martyrs is engulfed in a wave of grabbing children's hands. I squeeze through the chaos to an ambulance, its back doors open. Inside, there's a tired-looking old man watching two soldiers, holding each other, crying gently. Next to them a young boy, maybe five, sits, tense. He stares at me, blankly for the longest time, in his hands he holds a single red flower.

THE LOST SON

Mohamed was shot on 8 November 2000 near a checkpoint on the outskirts of Khan Yunis. One bullet hit him in the heart, killing him instantly. He was 15. His father, Mosbah, has never recovered from losing his eldest son. The walls in his neighbourhood are still covered with images of Mohammed. In his room, a shrine to his dead son reminds him that Mohammed died for Palestine and for Islam reminds him to be strong.

“When I heard the news I walked the streets in a daze. Finally, I fell down in the road and wept. Friends helped me back to my house – I didn’t know where I was. I cried every day for 10 months...

“With this bullet they didn’t just kill Mohammed, they killed the whole family. Our god wanted this, so we must accept, but you can never know how special he was to us.

“His brothers and sisters are afraid. Every second they think of what happened. When they eat, when they sleep. I try to make them forget, but how can I stop them thinking? Mohammed was the oldest; he was the one that made them smile, that brought them presents, that took them to the sea. They saw his dead body in this room. I try to reassure them that things are okay, but inside I know they are not”.

“At any time Mohammed’s brothers or sisters could be shot. My friend has had both his sons killed. All the time I try to make them aware of what’s happening, of the dangers. If you are a man who has lost one of his arms, would you let your other arm be taken? They stay away from the checkpoints, but children have been killed on their way to school. Nowhere is safe...

“Fifteen, maybe 20 years ago I would often go to the sea. The currents are very strong and many times I swam in and rescued Israeli boys in trouble. I rescued many boys. And they took my son away. This is not justice.”

