

The testimony of a reserve soldier in Jenin

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My close colleague came back into the office on Thursday afternoon, the end of our working week, still in uniform with his M-16 and pistol on him. This was the day that the IDF left the Jenin refugee camp to reassemble in the area, returning to the status quo that existed before the Passover Eve massacre (in which so many at the Park Hotel in Netanya were murdered by a suicide bomber).

He was called up for emergency reserve duty (they call it an Order-8, or tzav shmonae) and is the officer in charge of the military field infirmary, assigned to the reserve unit who lost the nine soldiers in that one incident last week. So what I'm passing on here was told directly to me, just hours after he left the Jenin area, while in Yokne'am — 19 kilometers from Jenin (where we both work and he lives). I didn't record his exact words, but am using the exact expressions, emphasis and am remaining true to his stories.

These are not pleasant stories, so you might want to stop here, if you think your *stomach* won't be able to handle it. I'm purposely not going to amplify or soften his words. I'm going to try to give you the feeling that you are sitting in my office listening to him.

I was looking at a battered soul. Unshaven, you could see both relief and shock on his face. Having served on the border (and beyond) for 22 years in the IDF, I immediately recognized his expression and I was having a hard time holding back MY tears and realizing (generally) what he had been through.

After inquiring as to his own state, the inevitable question arose, "So?" That was enough to set him in motion. It was obvious that he needed someone "on the outside" to spill to. He emphatically started with, "This was not a slaughter! It was not a massacre!" The soldiers were hearing the reports of what the press was publicizing. "The Nazis would go into an area or town and purposefully pull out the women and children and either murder them or send them off to death camps. The men got only the first option, murdered on the spot. That is massacre. This was not the case in Jenin. You can't believe what you see. I saw it with my own two eyes."

Let me clarify that although he is a trained infantry soldier, his job is the commanding officer of the field infirmary that was established specifically for this operation on the outskirts of the town and refugee camp of Jenin. He, and his men, would only go into the area to either rescue the injured or "retrieve" the dead Israelis. Although they were assigned to the reserve unit that took part, they treated all the injured of all the units in the fighting - as well as any Palestinians who would allow themselves to be taken for treatment. (I'll relate to that problem three paragraphs down, in the body of his words.)

"First, we didn't think we were going into *war*. We weren't ready for what we found there. The whole place was one big booby trap with secret tunnels and enough explosives to blow up all of Israel twice. Don't forget, this is a place (specifically the Jenin Refugee Camp) that not even the

Palestinian Authority could go into. This was the undisputed territory of the Islamic Jihad and the Hamas.

"Our guys were getting picked off like sitting ducks. I saw our dead as they were brought back to the infirmary. Each was hit by one bullet to the head or neck. They had sharpshooters at every strategic location possible and all were well trained and their rifles were exactly calibrated. One sniper would shoot from atop of some home, and the same guy would pop up a minute or two later from on top of another home on the other side of the street. We found that they had an elaborate system of tunnels in which to get around in. We were paying the price for our policy of deliberately not attacking non-fighters in the midst of close conflict. We could have saved a lot of our guys had we just used the missiles or bombs of the F-16s to demolish buildings at a distance. We tried all we could to hit only those who were shooting at us.

"When we'd get to a building from which we were being constantly shot at, we'd try returning fire when we could. But they knew the camp to its millimeter, and realized exactly where they could pin us down. We'd use bullhorns to call for anyone in the building to come out before we would raise the level of our response. Again, this was out of concern for innocent lives. One time, and I saw this right before my eyes, a couple of families came out. There was a man, a woman, some boys, girls and even babies. Another family of more or less the same makeup also emerged. Now, we're in our armoured vehicles. We couldn't open the hatches or step out cause every time we tried, we'd be shot in the first second. We called for them to raise their shirts so that we could be sure that they weren't *wearing* any explosives. Only the men raised their shirts. When we called for everyone to do the same, the second the women raised their garments...B O O M. Everybody standing there was blown all over the place. They exploded themselves - entire families! It was horrific. It was also obvious that we would be blamed for having slaughtered them. It was insane.

"Sometimes, when all else failed, we'd call in an Apache helicopter that would fire its rapid fire gun into the window from where the fire was coming. Within seconds, the shots continued down at us. The Apache would then fire an exact hit of a missile into that same window. It wouldn't help - the fire continued down on us. Too many soldiers were injured or killed when they tried to enter a house, only to find it booby trapped or see the fighters firing from behind the family who lived in the house. Many died because they wouldn't fire into innocent civilian shields. When nothing else would end the standoff, a new vehicle was called in to take out the fire. When nothing else would end the standoff, a D-9" (a new vehicle, modeled from a Caterpillar construction chain-tractor, but armored so that almost nothing can damage it) "was called in to take out the fire. Again, as in the other instances, we called a few times for everyone to come out and that, if necessary, we would destroy the building. When no one did, the D-9 nudged a corner of the building to give them a warning. Again we gave a verbal warning over the loudspeaker. Again, no response.

The D-9 would take out a corner pillar of the building and we would wait for some response. Again, the verbal warning would go out. And so on till the assassin would fall with the building. Only afterward can one accurately find out who was in the building. Horrific.

"A commander I knew went into one of the houses from where there was firing. He found a Kalatch (AK-47 Kalatchnikov automatic rifle) on the table and picked it up. It was booby trapped and exploded. The explosion detonated a grenade on his belt and blew away the lower half of his body. Horrible stuff. You can't imagine. I was carrying soldiers out, under fire, on my back. The rain was relentless, creating waist deep mud from the hashed earth where the tanks had passed. I was filthy with my uniform and face black with mud. When I was out of the rain for a while, I still felt that my back was wet. When I took off my shirt, I saw that it was soaked in the blood of the soldiers who I'd carried. A young Nachal soldier, a kid; we worked on him for an

hour and a half. When we finally got a helicopter down to take him to hospital, the copter doctor checked him and said, 'Sorry-too late.' I'd been stroking his forehead for an hour and a half. And he was gone. Just a kid. What can I tell his mother?"

I asked him how he was dealing with it all. He told me that he went many hours without sleep and was exhausted. He might be able to sleep "well" for a few nights, but having gone through what he's gone through, he'll never be the same.

While he was still in Jenin, the IDF pulled out of Tulkarem. It wasn't long after that pullout when a suicide bomber succeeded in getting on a bus to Jerusalem and exploding himself, 15 minutes in front of me on my daily route to work. You cannot give in to terror. Yet the ineffectiveness of this mini-war was clarified this evening on the Friday Night News (the most watched news program of the week-other than by the religious) when it was stated that only 10-15% of the list of most wanted terrorists given to Tennat were either arrested or killed. So, another 85% of them are still out there; now with greater impetus, waiting for the opportunity to send some other martyr-to-be to strike another blow to Israelis. They kill Jews, Arabs, Druze and whoever is in the unlucky proximity. The main reason that they haven't succeeded in taking out a few thousand in one operation (as in the attack on the World Trade Center) is our constant security effort.

We have not stopped terror. In many ways, we have actually spilled fuel on their fires. It's a horrific dilemma. I support and protest for an immediate pull out from the occupied territories. I do have a plan. But most Israelis are still hurting from one terror attack or another. They tell all good Americans, "Go sit and make peace with Bin Laden - 11,000 miles away from your closest city. It may take a while. More innocent civilians may die in the meantime. Then, you can tell us how to 'exercise restraint,' 10 miles away." As the owner of an Israeli hi-tech company just wrote the Danish prime minister (after the deal to sell his company to a Danish one was aborted in protest to Israel's policies), "If I have to chose between my daughter's safety and life and your money, keep it!"

We must get out of the territories. But we also must stop terror. I said, in a message 3 days before the terror attacks on America - immediately following the suicide bombing in Nahariya-terror is terror. It is not limited by boundaries. If it can thrive somewhere, it can hit anywhere. Even in America. And guess what, baseball fans...it ain't over. D-9s and B-52s can't take it out.

Please act responsibly in your protests and actions. But do act. Try not to add fuel to anybody else's fire. (That's easy-blame someone or something. Simplify the conflict into one solution. SORRY! Doesn't work.) There are no easy solutions and we must all become active in working to solve the many complex problems. It will take time. I hope we have it.

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