In the shadow of the wall

By David Pratt
sundayherald.com | September 26, 2004

Having passed with flying colours, Tuval returns to the main gunshop attached to the shooting gallery, where the owner renews the licence for the Beretta, and sells him a fresh box of bullets.

WINCHESTER – FULL METAL JACKET says the writing on the box. In the display case beneath the counter is an assortment of other guns, saw-toothed "special forces" knives, knuckledusters and telescopic batons for sale.

Next to us an elderly woman, who a few seconds earlier was going though her own locked-and-loaded routine like a veteran SAS man, is now perusing a selection of "discreet gun pouches" which the manufacturer insists are the "Best home your weapon will ever find".

"Be sure to wash your hands, you don't want to get lead poisoning," Tuval tells me as I pick up one of the tiny copper coloured bullets from the table to take a closer look.

A journalist and researcher by profession, Alon Tuval is no more a fanatic than Hassan Akramawi is a terrorist.

Akramawi is a shopkeeper on what used to be the main Jersualem to Jericho Road. When I meet him he is suffering from flu, worried about who will pick up his kids from school, and the effects on his grocery shop of what is simply referred to as "the wall".

"My business is dead because this wall has cut the street, cut people off from each other and their own families," he says, his voice shaking with emotion. Perhaps it's the effects of the flu, but there is a real sense that this is a man hovering on the edge of breakdown.

Outside Akramawi's shop the wall runs right across the road. Forty feet high, it slices through the community, severing Jerusalem from the West Bank village of Abu Dis.

"If you want security for your house you build the wall in your own garden not in your neighbour's," he complains, increasingly fired up and distraught.

The wall's ugly grey cement is pockmarked where rocks have been thrown at it in anger. In bright red painted letters someone has daubed "From Warsaw Ghetto to Abu Dis

In the shadow of the wall / 2

Ghetto". Someone else points out that it was "Paid for by the USA," while another asks, "Is this the work of a man of peace?"

A few children negotiating a checkpoint that crosses from one side of the wall to another on their way home from school, stop by Akramawi's shop for some sweets. "This is all I sell now for a shekel or two to the kids. I even take the light bulbs out because I have to save some money, life is too difficult to live any more."

Tuval and Akramawi, one Israeli, and one Palestinian, live only a few miles apart on either side of Jerusalem's "green line". Their lives like countless others, are etched with fear and uncertainty by an age-old conflict, the latest round of which is known today as the al-Aqsa intifada.

It was four years ago this week, before he became Israeli Prime Minister, that Ariel Sharon went for his now infamous walk on what Jews call Temple Mount. In a play on words using Sharon's nickname, a Palestinian colleague I knew at the time likened the gesture to that of "the bulldozer, in a china shop".

Sacred to Jews, the site of Temple Mount is known by Arabs as al-Haram al-Sharif: the third holiest site in Islam, it also hosts the al-Aqsa mosque.

Sharon's act could not have been more calculated to ignite violence. Within hours of his visit, hundreds of incensed Palestinians throwing rocks and petrol bombs confronted Israeli troops, and many Palestinians were subsequently gunned down. The al-Aqsa intifada was born.

But as the intifada enters its fifth year, many on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide are growing ever more concerned as to where it is leading them. According to recent Israeli Defence Force (IDF) estimates, the coming year will be a critical period for the Palestinian people and the conflict.

"This year will be the year that will shape the Palestinian struggle. The Palestinian leadership will have to decide whether to aim towards a peace agreement with Israel or to continue with the armed resistance," says one senior IDF officer.

But what of the Palestinians themselves? As Israel's security wall daily encroaches into their territory and lives, do they also sense that a make or break showdown is fast approaching?

In the past, particularly in the years 1987 to 1993, following the first intifada or "war of the stones," as it was known, anniversaries of the uprising were often opportunities for Palestinians to endorse resistance to the occupation through street demonstrations or an escalation of attacks on Israeli targets.

But this year the mood is different. While much of the fight against occupation by ordinary Palestinians remains heroic, these are unheroic times. Suicide bombings like that

In the shadow of the wall / 3

by a woman in the busy French Hill suburb of Jerusalem last week has lost the intifada some of its outside worldwide sympathy.

Meanwhile, a leadership crisis has led some to predict that what really preoccupies Palestinians these days is an "intra-fada" – an uprising not against Israel but against elements of Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA), long perceived to be corrupt and politically out of touch.

Then there is the wall. It's hard to overemphasise the sheer injustice of this concrete scar that gouges its way across olive tree orchards, family homes, grazing areas, places of work, schools and anything else that, frankly, the state of Israel decides to confiscate. Its sheer physical presence bears down when you are near it. Walking beside it, on either side, you can see Palestinians trying to live their lives under its weight. Like the South African regime during apartheid, the Israelis are well on the way with their policy of containment to creating the equivalent of the infamous Bantustans, where most black South Africans were forced to live.

"This used to be a beautiful place, now I live in the shadow, no sun, no light, even the air seems bad," one local Abu Dis farmer tells me, struggling to make himself heard against the deafening sound of bulldozers working on the next stretch of wall nearby.

The degradation and humiliation of Palestinians is made all the worse by the employment of some of their men by private Israeli security firms to guard other Arab labourers who work on the wall's construction.

"I know they blame us for this," says one guard when asked what he thinks of the Palestinian villagers who stand nearby watching as a bulldozer digs up their back garden to lay cables used for high-powered security lights and electrified fencing.

Elsewhere, other Palestinian labourers can be seen daily running the gauntlet of army patrols to cross gaps in the wall before being picked up by Israeli employers to work in a variety of "dirty jobs" inside Israel itself. A useful source of cheap labour, few of these Israeli employers seem concerned by the security risk involved, or that one of their workers just might be a suicide bomber.

In these desperate economic times, most Palestinians have no choice but to take what they can that offers them a living. Even sometimes at the risk of being called a "collaborator".

Why, most ordinary Palestinians ask, has the outside world been so quiet in its condemnation of the security wall despite the International Court's ruling that its construction is illegal? Why is it called a "security" wall at all, when instead of just separating Israel from the West Bank it separates Arab from Arab?

Indeed, how can a people whose history is full of terrible ghettos, now themselves be

In the shadow of the wall / 4

building one?

As these questions continue to be ignored, above Abu Dis village stands what was once The Cliff Hotel. As a struggling freelance correspondent covering the first intifada in the 1980s, this was my home on and off for many years.

At The Cliff I met fellow journalists and aid workers, celebrated Christmas, held an engagement party, and made friends from among the Palestinian community and around the world. Some of the memories are among the fondest of my life.

It is difficult to explain the feelings I had when last week, I found that the security wall had cut right through its grounds, and the building itself was now an Israeli army base and checkpoint.

According to one local man who asked to be called Abu Hamid, a few days ago following the suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem many Palestinians carrying green West Bank ID cars and returning from the capital, were arrested and detained at The Cliff.

One man is said to have been badly beaten by soldiers, who urinated in his mouth before pushing him from a second storey roof. While I was unable to corroborate this story, such human rights abuses are not uncommon in the occupied territories. “We have been here since 1958. First they confiscated the hotel when we would not sell, and now they cut us off from the rest of our family just over the other side,” explains Ali Ayad, whose cousins are owners of the one-time hotel.

Already, Ayad has paid £1700 to a lawyer to take up his own case with the Israeli authorities, but admits it's probably hopeless given that a military confiscation order was signed, from which there is no right of appeal.

Knowing this, why then did he pay the lawyer money? “Like a blind man who cannot move you take whatever guidance you can get,” he says.

Today, to visit the rest of his extended family, Ayad has to travel 10km of Israeli checkpoints and harassment for the sake of the few hundred metres that separates him from his in-laws because of the wall.

Does he think that one day he might see the wall come down? “If the Europeans and international community stand with us, it will come down. The Berlin wall fell and who would have thought that possible?” he says, echoing the eternal optimism that characterises many Palestinians.

If indeed the wall is to fall, then a political solution with or without the pressure of the intifada must be found. But as many Palestinians are quick to admit, patience among the up and coming generation who have watched friends and families suffer at the hands of the Israelis is in seriously short supply.

One source tells me how in Nablus, the skills and language of bomb making has become

commonplace among young men and women, many having learned their skills from elder brothers or the internet.

"Um Albed went to Jersualem today," they say. "Um Albed" being a nickname for homemade nitroglycerine and the equivalent of saying "John Smith went to Jerusalem today". Some youngsters also joke and talk disparagingly of al-Kahta – a small or insignificant thing – when referring to pipe bombs.

Some Palestinians, however, have started advocating that non-violence and mass civil disobedience like the sort put forward by Arun Gandhi – grandson of India's illustrious freedom campaigner Mahatma, who recently visited the West Bank – is the best way forward.

But significantly, what Gandhi and his supporters fail to understand is that a non-violent struggle requires specific conditions that are not present in the current intifada.

The first and most obvious condition is that non-violence should carry with it the moral weight that makes violent retaliation unconscionable.

If the experience of the first and present al-Aqsa intifada proves anything, however, it is that non-violence by Palestinians is rarely reciprocated by the Israeli security forces.

Given this, most likely it will be the likes of the al-Aqsa Brigade's Jenin commander, 28-year-old Zakaria Zubeidi, that will win the ear of the young generation of "shebab", the young men who take the fight to the streets and are prepared to martyr themselves in the battle against Israeli occupation.

But even the likes of Zubeidi, wanted dead or alive by the Israelis, senses that the intifada is in terminal need of a new strategy.

"The martyrdom operations are still part of the struggle," insisted Zubeidi recently, "but they are a tiny part."

For now the intifada, with all its limitations, remains almost the only weapon Palestinians have in terms of political clout. For an increasingly desperate people it is either ghost dancing or nation building, and sometimes it is both.

At the very least, it has crystallised their sense of being a nation, but it is a phantom nation. Insubstantial perhaps, but incandescent yet.

David Pratt is foreign editor of the Sunday Herald, Scotland's leading Sunday newspaper.