

Under the gun: a Palestinian journey

Earlier this month, the Guardian sent acclaimed novelist Ahdaf Soueif to Israel and the occupied territories. This is the searing account of her journey.

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PART ONE:

I have never, to my knowledge, seen an Israeli except on television. I have never spoken to one. I cannot say I have wanted to. My life, like the life of every Egyptian of my generation, has been overcast by the shadow of Israel. I have longed to go to Palestine, but have not wished to go to Israel. And now I am going there.

I have not felt such anticipation or such fear since I was a child. For the past two months I have been following the news of the intifada. I have compared the images on the BBC and CNN with those on al-Jazira and other Arab channels. I have unspun stories, fumed at the American newspapers and been grateful for some of the reporting in some of the British press. I have started and ended my days reading appeals for help on the internet. And over and over again I have asked myself: "What is it that I can do?" Now at last I can do something; I can go see for myself, and write. But going means going there.

Monday

It is the first day of Ramadan and we are on the road from Amman to the bridge and I am staring out at the desert and thinking - as I always do - how much I miss it when I'm in England: 10 minutes of rolling dunes, then rock formations rising like huge chocolate gateaux followed by dunes again - but this time rippling as though having a joke, then a bend in the road and a green valley opens up and suddenly a row of bedouin women walking elegantly along a ridge, then sand again and we are at the Jordanian terminal which seems almost empty. We unload and our driver makes inquiries. The West Bank, al-Daffa, is closed. He points to a large, low building and through the windows we see that it is crammed with people. "But Jerusalem?" the woman with whom I've shared the taxi asks. Jerusalem, apparently, is open.

I know nothing of this woman except that the small daughter on the seat next to her is called Malak - Angel. An orthodox priest in black robes and a grey braid comes out of the room and takes a taxi back to Amman. We go to another part of the terminal. Buses are waiting, loaded with people. Angel's mother decides to go VIP for the sake of the child. I walk along behind her. We hand over our passports and are ushered into a large room with sofas and Arabic newspapers. An exhausted woman comes in. She says she sat in this room yesterday from 2pm till 8pm, then was told Jerusalem was closed and had to go back to Amman. But an official comes in and waves us out.

A van this time and when we get off - there it is: "al-Jisr," Umm Angel [Angel's mother] says - the bridge. A wooden construction, just like in the pictures, with wooden walls so you can't jump off and into the Jordan river. We walk across, two women and a red-haired child and there, above our heads, are Israeli soldiers just as I've seen them on television for four decades: their eyes behind shades, their faces behind machine-guns and above them two crossed Israeli flags: one fluttering in the breeze, the other caught in some spike of machinery and lying limp.

We stop at a kiosk and hand our passports in through a window to a young woman in army uniform. She waves us on. Another van and on to another terminal building. Had there been Jordanian soldiers and guns on the other side? I didn't see any, but maybe I just didn't notice.

We are sitting in a smallish, brightly lit room with vividly blue armchairs. Serious attempts at decor have been made: a cactus growing out of a half coconut shell tilts on an Arab-style carved wooden table, rubber plants and plastic flowers droop from dusty glass shelves, an empty drinks dispenser glows coldly in the corner. On the walls are three reproductions: two are Kandinsky-like, but the third is a large close-up of the two forefingers of God and Adam just failing to meet.

A polite young Israeli comes in and asks me in broken Arabic to fill out some forms. Then he comes back to escort us to the passport window. I say: "I don't want my passport stamped." He says: "I know."

2.30pm, Jerusalem

I head out of the hotel and start walking. Every car I pass I imagine exploding into flames. How far away does one have to be not to be killed by an exploding car? But the sun is shining as I head down Salah el-Din

Street - and I am at home. The street is lined with bakeries, haberdasheries, shoeshops, small grocers, hairdressers. Girls in school uniform and headscarves walk in groups, chatting, laughing. Boys loiter and watch them. The names on the shops and the doctors' signs are the familiar mix of Muslim and Christian Arab, French and Armenian. The French cultural centre has wide-open doors and an inviting garden; there is a smell of roasting coffee. It's like a smaller, cleaner, uncrowded Cairo. But two buildings look different from the others: they are modern, precise, their angles are sharp, they fly the Israeli flag, and they are the only ones with closed gates that are made of steel bars.

But then appearing in front of me are the walls of the Old City. Closer in I see the ancient gateway and beside it an Israeli army car and five soldiers armed with machine-guns. I tie a scarf under my chin and walk past them, through al-Zahra Gate, and I am in a medieval Arab city: Orshalim al-Quds, Jerusalem the Sacred, a city made of rose-hued stone. The streets are paved with it; like cobbles, only larger, the stones are worn smooth and shine in the light. Down steps, round bends and another rosy alley stretches ahead. The houses seem to grow out of the street. Their green iron doors are closed and around many of them are the decorations that proclaim the resident has made the pilgrimage to Makkah. You see these in any Egyptian village but here, instead of the representations of the pilgrim and his/her transport, you get delicate drawings of flowers and birds.

A small handwritten sign on the wall points to al-Aqsa. I walk down Mojahedin (Holy Warriors) Street. A small boy, maybe four years old, skips along chanting "ya Saddam, ya Saddam, come and blow up Tel Abeebe". A few steps behind him his mother smiles at me. And now I am in front of the gateway to al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary). Inside the gateway, sitting at a wooden table are three armed soldiers. One stands up and blocks my path: "Papers." I don't like the look of them. I'm one and they are three. My passport is British but it says born in Cairo. Egypt has just recalled its ambassador. But a couple of local men from the administration of the mosque are standing just inside the gateway. I hand over my passport. The soldier flicks through it. "In England, you live?" He has a heavy, east European accent.

"Yes."

I've been told don't explain, don't justify, don't be defensive. Minimal response.

"What town?"

"London."

"Why you are going in?"

I decide: "To pray."

"You are Muslim?"

"Yes."

The Israelis have closed the Haram to all Palestinian Muslims, except residents of Jerusalem. And the men have to be above 45. The soldier goes through my bag which I have emptied of everything except purse, tissues and comb. His mates look into the bag, too. He motions me on with his head.

A few steps and I am in the vast enclosure of the Haram. Brown earth with shrubs, patches of grass, trees. To my left, the city walls; to my right, the Sanctuary wall is the back of houses and churches, and ahead of me the path rises to meet a wide set of white steps leading to a great stone terrace and out of that rises the golden Dome of the Rock. I sit on a low stone wall under the open sky surrounded by small Mameluke structures and sense utter peace.

Later the women come out of prayers. They look at me with open curiosity:

"Salamu aleikum!"

I return the greeting.

"From where, sister?"

"From Egypt."

They want to know if I have somewhere to stay, otherwise any one of them will take me home. They all live in the old city, the Dome of the Rock is their local mosque; they nip down every day to pray.

Two minutes takes me round a corner, up some stairs and into Umm Yaser's home. Her two young daughters-in-law are both students. They whisper and laugh together over their books.

"She got married three days ago," Umm Yasir says, pointing to one of the

girls. "Just over a cup of coffee. Who can have a wedding now when people are being killed every day?"

"Does the situation affect you here, in the Old City?"

"Look!" Umm Yaser says taking me to her door, pointing at the shuttered house across the lane: "The settlers took it over. They put chairs out here in the lane and pick quarrels with the young people coming and going." But how did they take it over?

"Since Ariel Sharon bought two houses here he's made it easy for them."

But how? Who would sell to Sharon?

"Awwad Abu Sneina. Everybody knew he was a spy. He vanished from the neighbourhood and next thing we knew the Israeli flag went up on the house and Sharon had bought it. But when Abu Sneina died there wasn't a burial ground that would take him. That day my son was playing football and the ball hit one of them [the settlers], they grabbed him and said they'd call the police. We said call the police. But they called some other settlers instead. Two hundred of them came from Atarot Cohunim, hit us with everything they had - even their walkie-talkies. The people praying in the mosque heard the noise and came to our help and it was a battle. The police said we were the aggressors. At the Hadasa hospital they would not treat us under the insurance. They made us pay 450 shekels. Affect us? They do what they like to us."

She talks of tear gas pumped into houses, of rubber bullets which the Palestinian children peel to extract the steel marble within, which they then aim back at the soldiers with their slingshots. She talks of the threat to her mosque, of an ambulance bringing a 78-year-old neighbour back from hospital, how soldiers searched it and stripped it down to the cooling unit: "they've grown afraid of the air itself." I feel dizzy with the detail piling up in my head and leave before I can be made to stay and eat.

Through Bab el-Silsila I see several young Jewish men in black clothes hurrying along and into the tunnel that - I assume - leads to the Wailing Wall. Further along a mild-looking man wearing a yarmulke and leading two children steps out of a building. From within I hear the sound of children chanting in Hebrew. The sun has set and it is time to break my fast.

In Bab el-Amoud a man at a stall fills me a pitta bread with falafel, salad and tahina. He finds a chair for me and places a glass of water on the

ground at my side. I sit inside the ancient gateway and eat - within sight of the army car and the soldiers and beyond them a beautiful, Indian-looking building standing alone. Two young men lean against a wall discussing what the Arab states can reasonably be expected to do. If only Egypt and Jordan would open the borders, they say, so we're not mice in a trap like this.

Back at the hotel I phone a journalist contact. An American I think. I ask a few questions then my enthusiasm for the city bursts forth - and is met with silence.

"What? You don't agree?"

"Well, yes," she says. "It's just that I think everything would be so much easier if it wasn't there."

I go out to the grocery next door. I want to buy some yoghurt and dates for my pre-dawn meal. The TV set on the wall is tuned into a Palestinian channel showing the news. Every pot of yoghurt I pick up is labelled in Hebrew only. "Don't you have any Palestinian yoghurt?" I ask and the man ushers me to another refrigerator.

The news comes through of five workers killed by settlers. A sixth man had managed to get away. The ambulances had raced to the scene but been stopped by the army. Everybody in the shop has stopped in mid-motion and is watching the set. The tears roll down my face as someone's wife wails on the screen but everybody else is impassive. When the item is over they go back to what they were doing.

The key to my hotel room will not lock from the inside. From the outside its fine, but not from the inside. I try and try. I feel uneasy about alerting people to the fact that my door does not lock. I decide that I'm safe enough here. I sit down to write today's notes.

Soon I will have to try to meet some Israelis.

Tuesday

Abraham, Ibrahim al-Khalil, the Friend of God, father of the Arabs through Ismael son of Hager, and of the Jews through Isaac son of Sarah. At midday I am in the city that bears his name and houses his magnificent mosque. We have circuited two roadblocks to get here, turning a journey of half an hour into one of an hour and a half. Our car has Israeli licence plates and so - as we pass the Uruba refugee camp - my driver puts a

large sign saying "Press" in Arabic against the windscreen to prevent us being pelted with stones. When we pass the giant settlement of Kiryat Araba, my driver turns the Arabic sign over to display the English. "They came in 1969. They pretended they were a group of Swedish tourists and stayed in a hotel. Their leader was Moshe Levinger. Then they started clashing with the people and they were backed by the military governor, they took the land and built the settlement."

Think of al-Khalil (or Hebron) as two parts: the old city surrounding the mosque, and the new suburbs that have grown out of it. The main square of the new part is teeming with people. Vegetable and fruit stalls teeter on the edges of pavements and on traffic islands. The Israelis have expropriated the old marketplace and bulldozed it. Raise your eyes from the bustle and you see the evidence of shells and mortars on the building surrounding the square. A gaping hole where the offices of al-Ayyam (the Days) newspaper used to be. Doctor's clinics, toyshops, a hairdresser: rubble, soot, shattered glass and pockmarks. Raise your eyes further and you see the Israeli army sandbagged on people's rooftops, their guns trained on the throng below. "Twelve tonnes of equipment on my roof," a man tells me, "and they urinate in our water-tanks."

Al-Shuhada (The Martyrs) Street leads into the old city. It is empty and the shops are shuttered. At its end I see concrete road blocks and as I watch I see a soldier emerge from behind a building beyond the roadblocks, he surveys us, his machine-gun aimed. When he disappears I start walking down the road. My guide pulls me back: "No. There's already been shooting today." The soldier reappears, followed by another. There are maybe 20 metres between us. A young man comes out of a building and says: "You don't need to be scared of them. Look!" He runs a few paces towards them, jumps up and down stamps his feet waves his arms and yells out the Arabic equivalent of "Boo!" The soldiers duck behind the wall. "See! They're cowards!" he laughs and saunters off.

As we stand talking a tall man appears carrying a camera and wearing a white helmet and a white bullet-proof vest with "Press" written in black across it. Awad Awad works for Agence France Presse. He stops to talk and my guide tells him I'm writing an article for the Guardian. "You want to go in?" he asks.

I follow him through the roadblock and round the corner. Now I can see the soldiers grouped behind the wall at the end of al-Shuhada Street. Behind a building at the other side of the street are a journalist and three more photographers. We walk past the soldiers, then Awad says "Run!" and we

run across the street and join the posse of cameras on the other side. We introduce ourselves and shake hands. "What are they doing?" a man asks nodding towards the seven soldiers huddled behind the wall. "Making a plan," another laughs.

The soldiers break up and three of them run across the road towards us. They crouch behind the concrete blocks, their guns aimed at the empty street. If I stretch out my hand I can touch their backpacks. After a moment a stone crashes into one of the concrete blocks and splinters off. A boy dances across the street. A shot is fired. It is alarmingly loud. The same event is repeated six times in the next half hour. Twice, in the silence following a shot a woman walks quickly across the street. Three people in blue dungarees and helmets with IPIF written in red across their bullet-proof vests [international observers] stand across the road. I cannot make out if they are men or women. They carry clip-boards and timers and seem to be recording the times of the shots. The photographers tell me that when there is going to be any real action the soldiers simply shoo away the IPIF people. A mobile rings and it is my guide begging me to come back.

I want to go into the old city but my guide and driver are fearful and reluctant. As we argue in the street an imposing man in a grey cashmere overcoat appears. They seem awed by him. I later learn that he is a Palestinian journalist who has been shot in five separate incidents. He says "Come on chaps. It's your duty to take her in. You've got Israeli licence plates. She's got a British passport. Take her in."

Reluctantly they make a detour and try to drive into the old city. Forty thousand people live here under curfew. 12,000 children cannot go to school. Fifteen mosques are closed. In the centre, armed, live what Israel says are 400 settlers and the Palestinians say are 100. All this is for their benefit.

"If the army were to go away," I ask, "and the settlers were content to live here among you, would you let them?"

"They would go away."

"But if they wanted to stay, could they?"

"But they've taken people's homes. If you could go into the centre you would see families camped by their homes, refusing to leave, and the settlers throw rubbish on them and beat them up. They're not even proper settlers; they are religious students, mostly from the US, volunteering to come for one or two years to do their religious duty by being here."

The city is beautiful. Like old Jerusalem it is made of pink stone. The narrow streets wind up and down like the streets of an Etruscan town. The houses lean against each other, one house's roof forming the other's patio. Ornate stone balconies look out on to the empty street. The sun shines, the air is clean and fresh, the light is so perfect we could be on a film set. A dark green patrol car passes and does not stop us. The microphone blares out in accented Arabic: "O people of al-Khalil. Beware breaking the curfew." Round the next bend a yellow taxi is at a stop in the middle of the road, leaning to one side. A group of children has gathered round it watching, hushed and still. We pull in by a wall and park. A woman leans against the taxi with a baby in her arms. "I know it's a curfew," the driver says, "but she has just come out of hospital, and she had the baby, so I drove her. Look what they've done." A soldier had taken out a knife and slashed the two tyres on the driver's side. Naturally he only has one spare tyre. With the curfew how is he going to get another one? Two boys are helping him change one wheel. The other children look on in silence. The woman starts walking off slowly.

We carry on, on foot. Up some steps leading down to the centre an old man is climbing. "Can we get to the centre?"

"No. They've blocked it off."

"Is there somewhere from where I can at least see the centre and the mosque?"

"Yes, from my house," and he turns back to lead the way.

Through a green iron door I step into paradise. Terrace after terrace of pink stone, green plants and flowers growing out of tin cans, trellises with vines, doorways that the old man opens with big keys and that lead into vaulted chambers where ancient Sufis meditated and prayed to be vouchsafed a vision. Some of the chambers have Mameluke niches where I imagine the Sufis kept their jars of water and bundles of dates. I emerge from a chamber to find myself looking at a wall with wire-mesh windows and above them the Israeli flag. "Yes. They are here," he says. They are looking at us and we keep our eyes averted. "They occupied the building next door and they tried to get me out of this. I said I would bring out my sword and kill the first man to step over my threshold."

"What happened?"

"They put iron doors on the street openings between my house and the mosque - and they set up this surveillance camera up there."

"And now they leave you alone?" as I take a photo of the camera.

"I have no children now or young men to make trouble. There is just me and my wife. The (Palestinian) authority came and said: Give us the biggest vault. We'll make it into a museum." "And?"

"I threatened them too with my sword. They would have turned it over to the Israelis."

An old woman appears on a balcony and calls to him to bring the guests into the house. On the patio outside the house two very old Singer sewing machines sit side by side. "I just oiled them yesterday," he spins the wheel to prove that they work beautifully.

In the living-room there is another sewing-machine. "But this one can do embroidery," he says, and pulls out a rag to show us the different stitches. "I don't know what he wants with all these old machines," his wife says. On the wall there are the three young men. On each there is written a name prefaced by "The Martyr".

"My nephews," the old woman says. Come, you can see the mosque from the kitchen window." I see the rose-pink walls of Ibrahim's Sanctuary and beyond them, in the central town square, the army camp with the sandbags, the guns, the soldiers and the white flag with blue star. My guide tells me that Saturday is the worst day here because the settlers have more time to walk around upturning vegetable stalls and kicking people. The army protects them, he says. My driver loses patience: "We've gone down the road of 'peace' as we were asked to. Meetings and summits without end. And what's the result? Is this right? That a wronged population should be punished? In 94 Baruch Goldstein murders the worshippers and this is what we get? The mosque is divided and now with the curfew this old man who has prayed in it every day of his life cannot set foot in it?"

"The unjust will be visited with retribution," the old man says gently, "and I pray on my terrace within sight of the Sanctuary walls."

I think of the decisive battle, in 1517, when Mameluke Egypt fell to the Ottoman Turks. When the dashing Mameluke knights, until then the finest fighting force in the world, rode out to do battle, they found themselves with the modern technology of Ottoman guns in front of them and treachery at their backs.

Back on the road the taxi is still there. We drive out of al-Khalil, negotiate

roadblocks and go on to the motorway. Ahead of us is an army truck. He drives slowly and we are not allowed to pass him. In the back three young soldiers watch us. It is getting near to sunset and breaking the fast. A roadblock near Bethlehem and we are pulled over. My driver opens his window and hands over his papers. I stare ahead but suddenly my door is flung open. A rather plump young soldier bends down, smiling:

"What did they thay today? The Tanthim? That they would thtop the shooting?"

Somehow the lisp reassures me.

"Who?" I ask.

"The Tanthim."

When I look blankly at him he says: "Fatah. What did they thay today?"

"I'm frightfully sorry," I say, speaking posh. "I don't know. I've been out all day and haven't seen the news."

"But you have a radio in the car?"

My driver leans over and speaks in Hebrew: "What would she know? Can't you see she's foreign?"

They wave us on. My driver is convinced the soldier's questions were a trap. "Son of a bitch," he laughs, "they don't miss a trick."

Maybe there are cafes in West Jerusalem or Tel Aviv where intellectuals, artists, people, sit around and debate the condition of the country and the "Palestinian problem". Maybe they debate the ethics of an army of occupation holding a population hostage, or the civil rights of an Arab population in a zionist state, but these places - the places that are lit up at night - how do I find them? In the entertainment guide I look at the listings: films, recitals, cabarets. I consider taking a taxi and simply buying a ticket. But even the thought makes me uneasy.

PART TWO:

Wednesday

Albert Agazerian teaches history at Bir Zeit University. He meets me just inside Bab el-Khalil gate and we walk towards the house where he lives with his family inside the Armenian convent grounds. He points out the first British consulate and the first British church: "Layers of history," he says. "Dig here and you come

up with at least 17 layers of history - and their stories are all woven together. Here in Jerusalem we have what the whole world today is headed for: plurality. But the Israelis want to cancel everybody's story except their own."

Madeleine, his wife, insists on giving me a jar of their olives. Her family has always got their olives from a particular farm near Nablus. Now the farmers are fighting not only the closures, she says, but the settlers who set fire to the olive groves or take chainsaws to the trees. "The farmers," she tells me, "slip out on Friday night and gather their own harvest while the settlers keep the sabbath." It's as though they have to steal their own crop.

My attempts to reach the other side of all this have so far not been successful. Shlomo Shamir, sometime Israeli ambassador to Egypt, could not see me because he was investigating the killings of the 13 Arab-Israelis in Israel.

Could we not talk about broader issues?

No. They are all related.

Gershon Baskin, who specialises in getting Arabs and Israelis together, has not returned my calls.

I am still trying to speak to someone from the Yesha council to arrange a meeting with a settler. It's not simple. From the first word it's not simple: I have often been asked whether I have a problem with English as the "language of my oppressor". I understand the question but I do not feel it; the British occupation was out of Egypt before I was born. English was the language of my first reading and I love it.

When the voice at the other end of the phone said "Shalom" I said "Shalom" back out of courtesy. I was left with a nasty feeling; a feeling that I had been somehow complicit. For the remaining seven calls I would respond with "Good morning/evening". When the Israeli army of occupation has been removed from the streets of Palestine I will say "Shalom" to a Jewish visitor to the Holy Land as I would join my hands and bow my head to an Indian one.

And if a meeting should be arranged, how would I get there? My Palestinian driver won't go near a settlement. And who will I get to go in with me? For there is no way I am going alone.

Last night I walked back to my hotel up Salah el-Din Street. I was still wearing the headscarf I wore at al-Aqsa and my dress reached to just above my ankles. I passed the barred building which I now know is the Israeli court. In front of it was the armoured car and four soldiers with the obligatory machine-guns. They were laughing together and I also thought that in the space of two days my fear had disappeared, my heart did not lurch. I must have taken 30 paces or so and was

about to turn the corner when I felt something hit my left shoulder hard and heard the crack as whatever it was ricocheted off me and hit - I suppose - the ground. What did I feel? I felt shock as I turned ice-cold then hot. I felt my throat block up and the tears rise to my eyes, and then I felt pure anger and I turned. As I looked at the ground to try to identify what had hit me one of the transits that carry people between towns screeched to a stop by my side. The door was pulled open and inside I saw women who looked like me, and children. The driver leaned over: "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said. I found that I was feeling ashamed, ashamed of having been hit. "Did you see who hit me?" I looked around the street. It was deserted except for the soldiers.

"No, we just heard the sound. Do you need help? We're going to Ramallah."

"My hotel's just round the corner."

"Don't wait here. Get in. I'll take you to the hotel."

"I'm all right," I said.

"God will punish them," a woman said. They did not drive off until I was round the corner and out of sight.

When I got to my room I pushed the heavy table with my suitcase on it against the door. I took off my coat and dress. In the mirror I could see the purple bruise on my left shoulder. It did not hurt, but in my mind I kept walking back to the soldiers, challenging: "Did you see who hit me?"

Thursday

4.30pm

I am sitting in the lobby of the hotel when Judy Blanc walks in. Stylish and small with her grey hair worn short and close-fitting, she is unmistakably a New Yorker. Her husband got a job as professor of Arabic at the Hebrew University in 1954 and she came with him. I have been told by my Palestinian friends that she is "one in a million". I ask her if this is true and she laughs "not quite." She says that the recent events - terrible as they are - have been useful in clarifying the Palestinian's priorities. That the Israeli government can no longer manipulate the confusion between principles and negotiating positions.

I ask her - it seems necessary to ask basic questions - where the "good" Israelis are? How can people, people who are aware that their government is subduing an entire population, cutting off their water and electricity, beating them up - I feel embarrassed at listing the misdeeds of the Israeli government to her - how can people, people with souls, tolerate this?

"But they're not aware, she says. It's so easy not to see it. You live in West

Jerusalem or in Tel Aviv. You don't need to notice the Palestinians. If they're there they're in the background. And there is a fundamental racism in this society that makes it possible for people to delude themselves, to not see what's happening. If you want to know what's happening you have to go looking for it, to East Jerusalem or the West Bank. Not many Israelis will do that."

Are there any Israelis working with Palestinians now?

"No. The Palestinians saw that the liberal position of making contact one on one was corrupting the political process. Now they do what the University of Bir Zeit has always done: any joint activity between Palestinians and Israelis has to be based upon the Israelis' articulated commitment to the minimum demands of the Palestinians: 242 and the Right of Return."

What about Peace Now and similar organisations?

"They have a problem. They supported Ehud Barak and now they say he's gone as far as he can and the violence has to stop. The TV liberals are really hampered by the fact that they supported him. Do you know, one of my friends, a good liberal, said to me last week: 'I finally understood that Oslo was not the same for the Palestinians as it was for us.' It took her seven years."

2am

I have been in my room for the last four hours, writing up my notes. There is so much to write. I have pushed the curtains wide open on my huge window, outside there are the massed houses and, above them, the tiny sliver of the four-night-old crescent of Ramadan. Fasting has never been as easy as it is here. From time to time I hear a quick series of explosions but I'm no expert and they could be kids playing for all I know.

Since I have been here I seem to have lost all apprehension (apart, that is, from the table wedged against the door). The contempt in which the people hold the army is infectious. "They are cowards," one young man tells me. "Let them just come out from behind their barricades, their helmets, their machine-guns and tanks and American technology. Let them meet us man to man, stone to stone."

I am shedding aspects of me which are superfluous to the situation. I do not wonder for a second whether I should or should not ask a question: I have no concern to be liked. Not once have I had to drag my usually unruly mind back of the business in hand. Every time I glance at it, it's working. completely focused, recording, recording. Maybe I'm shedding "me". And the bits of me that remain are the bits that cry as I write down the stories I hear. And the children look wonderingly at my tears and their mothers explain: "It's all new to her."

And were it not for my own children, back in London, I would stay. Stay in this city that brings out the cleanest and the clearest of me - and bear witness.