

LETTER FROM HEBRON BY JEAN-FRANÇOIS LÉPINE



When the interview was over, Nader Tamimi just sat there behind the desk in the little office where he receives customers who come to his pottery in Hebron.

Then, after an almost embarrassingly long silence, he pointed to the article in the Jerusalem Arab daily, *Al Fajr*, open on his desk: "You see, even in South Africa things have changed. Why is it that we, after twenty-three years, are almost the only ones in the world who are still living under the domination of a foreign army?"

That was on 8 June, and the morning newspapers reported that the day before the South African government had announced the lifting of the state of emergency allowing the white minority to impose a curfew in black townships, make arrests without warrants, and hold people without trial. In Hebron this has been the situation since 1968, only a few months after Israeli troops invaded and occupied part of Jordan. Hebron has known four different occupiers in the past hundred years. This thousand-year old city, built around the tomb of Abraham, is populated by Palestinians, and has been occupied in turn by the Ottoman empire, the British mandate, and the Hashemite kingdom, before the arrival of the Israelis.

The day we met Nader Tamimi, the people of Hebron were opening their doors for the first time after eight days of strict curfew, during which no one except doctors and medics were allowed to go out. The curfew had been imposed after young Palestinians attacked Israeli occupying troops with stones. Now, the whole town was at the market, hurrying to stock up with food.

Downtown, the Israeli army had put the troops on alert, with armoured personnel carriers at all the strategic crossings, soldiers armed to the teeth on the roofs and in the streets, and jeeps on constant patrol. But that day, nothing happened – maybe because the leaders of the *intifada* had not given the order to fight, but more probably because after eight days of house arrest, the citizens of Hebron had more important things to do than wage their daily little war.

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The Israeli authorities refuse to divulge just how many people – soldiers, special police, secret agents, bureaucrats, prison guards and interrogators – it takes to administer the occupied territories. The army runs municipal government, makes rules and hands out permits. The army closes schools, hospitals and businesses on a whim; it regulates public morality, and automobile traffic.

Israeli authorities maintain that present conditions are a direct result of the "aggressions" that have taken place since the beginning of the *intifada*. But Abu Nader, sixty-four year old head of the Tamimi family, and teacher turned businessman, sees things quite differently. Since 1985 he has been unable to leave Hebron to go to Amman, in Jordan, where most of his family lives. Today the two towns are separated by a world of political division and aggression between Jews and Arabs.

Abu Nader still has his Jordanian passport, even though King

Hussein of Jordan, weary of the war, relinquished all claim to the Israeli-occupied territories in 1988. It's the Israeli forces that have been preventing Abu Nader from going to visit his family since 1985, and all for reasons which even Israeli lawyers call fraudulent. For several years the army has been demanding that Abu Nader pay certain taxes that had never been levied before, mostly because the earlier Israeli administration simply wasn't sophisticated enough to do so.

Most of the family heads in the Israeli-occupied territories have had to face this kind of taxation over the past few years. The military administration assesses your

about the leaders of the *intifada* so that arrests can be made. In fact, practices such as guilt by association, intimidation, limiting the freedom of movement, and extortion are all forbidden under international human rights conventions.

But in Hebron, as elsewhere in the occupied territories, this is just routine stupidity compared with the usual violence of this very unusual war. Eight hundred people have been killed by the Israeli army since the *intifada* began in December 1987, and two hundred more were killed in internal political struggles. Around fifty Israelis, civilians and military, were killed during the same period. Thousands, especially young people, have suffered gun-shot wounds – many are handicapped for life. Then there are the daily arrests: according to Israeli sources, about 100,000 Palestinians have been detained at least once during the *intifada*. That works out to one arrest per family, quite enough to make a lasting impression on a people.

In June, a few days after our visit with the Tamimis, the leaders of the European Community, meeting in Dublin, condemned the systematic violation of human rights in territories illegally occupied by the Israeli military administration. The Dublin Conference appealed to the Israeli authorities to accept the presence of permanent UN observers to protect the population against arbitrary measures by the army.

There isn't the slightest reason to think that the appeal from Dublin was heard. Yitzhak Shamir, leader of the Likud party, had just come to power at the head of a coalition of all the right-wing, and extreme right-wing parties in the country. After almost three years of uprising, the prospects for a peaceful settlement in the territories had never looked as bleak. □

Jean-François Lépine was Middle East correspondent for CBC's The National as well as for SRC's Le Téléjournal from 1988 to 1990.

Translation by Eva Bild

This article is the first in a series of pieces, written from varied perspectives, that Peace&Security will present on the many elements that comprise the Middle East conflict – one of those confrontations that so far has seen little of the improvement evident in East-West relations and some other regional situations. It is appropriate to begin the series with Jean-François Lépine; he has for three years been a principal source of information for Canadians about this part of the world.