

Connecting people. Three days without hope

April 9, at night on Frankfurt airport

It will be a night in the airplane, like a couple of weeks ago on route to Iraq, and does not seem easier than back then. So many times since the beginning of 1992 have I been to Israel and Palestine. The years of hope are long gone.

Since the victory of Hamas at the Palestinian elections in the beginning of the year, the dilemma is complete. One and a half years ago, I travelled in Israel and Palestine for the last time. Even back then, there were hardly any grounds for optimism. Now, in a region, where ahead of time, this seems ever again impossible, yet more, like so often before, will be changed for the worse, because Israel as well obviously wages on escalation and on a "unilateral solution" that won't be one, but only the incorporation, in violation of international law, of large parts of the occupied territories, including Jerusalem and the prosperous Jordan valley, while the inhospitable remaining Palestinian territories will be split up into unviable Bantustans. Israel's fate as a democratic state and the liberation of the Palestinian people from decade-long occupation, oppression and social misery are inseparably linked to one another. Yet this is the abstract consequence that is hopelessly submerged by the violence by both sides as well as by the Israeli expansion and expropriation policy and by the fundamentalism of Hamas and other Palestinian groups. Where should someone with my sympathies for a free Palestine and a secure Israel put his heart?

The Palestinian elections were – also following the appreciation by international election observers – the first democratic and free elections in an Arabic country. However, with the result, apparently, no one can live. The tragic victim is the idea of democratisation in the Arabic world. The international demands to the Hamas – recognition of the existential right of Israel and of the negotiation results up to now as well as renunciation to violence – are natural and necessary. To many Palestinians, their own vote seems even more problematic. In the guise of the Hamas, an organisation with a reactionary image of women has won; the secular and pluralistic intellectual and cultural landscape is threatened already now by the marked readiness for censorship of the cultural ministers; legislative and government, on the one hand, and president and PLO, on the other (where Hamas is not a member, which internationally, however, often diplomatically as well, is recognised as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinians), oppose each other with hostility; with the elimination of the financial support by the USA, the EU, and Japan for the Palestinian autonomy agency as well as the holding back of the Palestinian taxes and tariffs by Israel, the economic and social situation, disastrous anyway, threatens to get exacerbated dramatically; there are menacing, in the briefest time, political chaos and civil war.

It is a policy of all participants that produces especially what one has always expected in terms of negative behaviour from the other side. The Hamas electoral victory has various origins. Last but not least, it is a reaction to the political and economic failure of the old Fatah administration and its corruption. Yet it is also a desperate response to the humiliation and ignorance of the West face to the Palestinians and their elementary distress. In Brussels, Washington and Tokyo, politicians take their resolutions at the green table without looking at the situation at the premises. One should really travel there, get to know the miserable daily life of

these people and concretely experience the merciless and comprehensive consequences of the Israeli wall and the security fence that only in part separates Israelis and Palestinians from each other, much more so and ten thousand fold more the Palestinians from each other and from their relatives, fields, markets, jobs, schools and hospitals. Israel's security, its free and democratic development are an axiom of any responsible international politics. Yet, two different yardsticks face to Israel and face to the Palestinians, concerning the upholding of international law, the resolutions of the security council, of the Road Map and human rights are not unacceptable and certainly politically counterproductive if it is to be really a matter of democracy and readiness for compromise on the Palestinian side. It should be taken into consideration after all what the end of the Western financial aid will mean concretely. After all, they do not hit the government, but people that suffer from terrible political and social conditions. It is correct, but all too easily said that one should not support a government that does not consequently abjure terror. However, why does one not think of immediately financing civil, economic and humanitarian projects and to pay out the money by way of the World Bank in such a way that the more than 150,000 employees of the Palestinian self-administration receive their salaries directly? Concerned are thousands of teachers, doctors, administrative employees, police men. Including family members, it is a matter of the social existence of about 1.5 million people. Can someone after all have an interest in a civil war between the still Fatah dominated Palestinian security forces that have no longer been paid since March and the Hamas government? Will we then consider ourselves confirmed in the assessment that the Palestinians are not capable of democracy and peace? That now Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia or Qatar enter the game financially, does not make the situation a cent better. In my opinion, the justified demands to the Hamas will be effective only if similar demands are also addressed at Israel and the international community.

Let's go. At least, I shall – in common with a few other deputies of the European Parliament – also take part in the start of a new peace initiative by Israeli officers and soldiers and Palestinian fighters (“combatants for peace”). Why should we have less optimism than those, who conduct war against one another, and now have the courage to break out of the spiral of mutual violence?

April 10, half past eight

Somewhat tired from the long night, but not exhausted, I sit in the lobby of the Hotel “Ambassador”, where I stayed already one and a half years ago and wait for my colleagues, who having arrived already yesterday, are still sitting at breakfast. The first meeting at 9 a.m. will be a meeting with diplomats of European states in East Jerusalem.

Mike fetched me at dawn at the airport in Tel Aviv. It was good to see his familiar face and to sense his sincerity, even though he had had to wait for two hours for me. Shortly after departure in Frankfurt, the captain had reported: It was impossible to pull back in the landing gear; one would try, in contact with the technicians, to find the damage and to correct it during the flight. That had not been possible. After 40 minutes, we had flown back, and after the repair, we had started back with two hours delay.

During the one-hour drive to East Jerusalem, I constantly had the deep feeling that the country was different than during my last visits. One cannot see political changes; however, the personal point of view may be influenced by the emotions and thoughts

one brings along. Then it occurred to me, however, that I had still never been here in spring, always only in the hot and dry summer, in the fall or in the Near East winter, when wide parts of the country lie brown and barren. It was the intensive green, the many blooming bushes and trees, the high fresh grass, the deep red poppy that have transformed even the Limestone Mountains around Jerusalem. The long German winter and the still undecided German spring this year have certainly made me yet more sensitive to the sunny green wealth this morning.

10 o'clock

The meeting with the European diplomats was interesting: All of them know what the drastic limitation of financial aid means to the women and men Palestinians, who in light of the economy wrecked by Israel and in particular the construction of the wall, were dependent completely on outside financial and humanitarian help. Of course, they are readily at hand with the arguments of the government. They are not completely wrong after all: The Palestinian government was not answering to the demands of the EU to recognise Israel and the international agreements and to realise an effective renunciation to violence. Yet politically, the financial embargo will have a counterproductive effect; it will convey to the Palestinians the feeling of collective punishment (moreover, for an election result that, in my opinion, may be disagreeable, yet that has been democratic), even of humiliation and provide the Hamas with additional support. Socially and economically, it is catastrophic for Palestine. Palestine received 280 million Euros in 2005 from the European Union. A French diplomat said: "Not everything may be destroyed what we have built up here. But the atmosphere is bad, and the partners have gotten lost or are no longer in office. Not everything is the consequence of the Hamas victory. The situation is made worse and worse by the Israeli policy of constructing the wall, barriers and controls, expropriation, the retention of Palestinian taxes and tariffs by Israel and the work possibilities for Palestinians in Israel." A Dane: "Time is extremely short. Much depends on the next steps by the Hamas and by Israel. For the population, it will quickly get dramatic. There threatens a socio-economic and humanitarian crisis. The Gaza trip is factually sealed off after the Israeli withdrawal. Since Friday, Israel has fired more than a thousand grenades and rockets at this territory. International aid transports are regularly blocked. The existing scenarios of the World Bank are extremely negative. It is only open still when the collapse will come." A Plan "B" on how the population might be helped in case that the Hamas does not give up, nevertheless, does not exist, except that the purely humanitarian aid should be extended as far as possible. We also discussed the double standards of the EU face to the Israeli and the Palestinian government and the absence of equally clear demands by the EU to the Israeli government. The answer to all our arguments was an oath of disclosure: "Be assured that we see all of that like you do. The greatest problem is the lack of influence on Israel. We are not politicians, but diplomats. We are not allowed to have contacts to the Hamas government. You Parliamentarians have more power to change policies." My colleagues and I react with a bitter laugh. The European Parliament was not and continues not to be asked in this matter by either the commission or by the governments.

On road to Ramallah

In particular in 2004, I got to experience the extent of the wall, of the security fences, of the Israeli blockades, the expropriations, the destruction of Palestinian houses, the streets defended to the Palestinians within the occupied territories and other harassments and humiliations as well as the terrible effects for the economic and the whole life of the people. The confrontation with the Hamas and its fundamentalism is

indispensable. However, in the form that it is conducted by Israel, the USA, and the European Union, it will only mean additional support for extremist forces.

It is difficult in the shaking bus to make notes that I will be able to decipher later. I have lost quite a few impressions that I had absolutely wanted to note down on other trips, because I had afterwards been able neither to read my handwriting nor to remember what had been the issue there. From East Jerusalem to Ramallah, we drive for a time until the checkpoint Qalandiya past the wall, which is about four to five meters high, located on Palestinian territory and in the middle of the road – one side of the road may be used by Palestinians, the other, beyond the concrete only by Israelis or people who have a special living allowance for East Jerusalem. Still two narrow gaps are available, so that Palestinian children, controlled by politicians and soldiers, may get over to their school on the other side. However, these too will be closed shortly. The giant concrete elements stand ready already.

Shortly before half past eleven

We are in the Muqata, once a prison, and it still appears that way, later it became Arafat's now Abu Mazen's (Mahmud Abbas) headquarters. One of his collaborators tells us that he was imprisoned here for seven years. The barricades that the Palestinian security forces had built for the protection of Arafat have disappeared. Since the bombardment by the Israeli armed forces, a couple of parts of the building have also been reconstructed, but everything appears hopeless and provisional. The speech of the member of the PLO negotiating delegation (with Israel), whom we meet here at first, impresses us all. The man speaks excellent English, arguments factually, with many facts, and in a discriminating way. Anyhow, the employees of this organ enjoy the international reputation to be extremely well educated and competent. What is impossible to see clearly during the drive becomes oppressively clear on the maps showing the course of the wall: The walls, the Jewish settlements and their access roads push themselves ever more deeply into the occupied territories and split the Palestinian settlements. The city of Bethlehem, South of Jerusalem, administered by the Palestinian autonomy agency, in the meantime is circled by walls and forbidden roads. Their inhabitants, women and men, are cut off from the hospitals, schools, and potential jobs in East Jerusalem that is only very few kilometres away. As 30 to 40 percent of all Palestinian economic activities take place in East Jerusalem, the consequences for the people in Bethlehem and other fenced in Palestinian settlements are terrible, since moreover, ever more areas and real estate in the big city and around it are expropriated and transferred to the Jewish settlers. Even if a part of East Jerusalem was offered one day by Israel to the Palestinians to be the Palestinian capital, the Israeli settlement policy shows it already now, it will be a small, isolated territory completely surrounded by Israeli settlements. The unilateral "solution" threatened by Olmert would probably result in a division of the Palestinian territory in three or in four and the permanent annexation of almost half of the occupied territories: The Palestinians would be shut up in the extremely densely settled Gaza strip, the region around Jenin and Nablus in the North, which would possibly still be divided from Ramallah by the wall reaching deeply into the East up to the Jewish settlement Ariel, and in the exclave Jericho in the East as well as in the region around Bethlehem and Hebron in the South. I do not find another expression for that. The international public ignores this development almost completely. Our speaker ends his report with a sombre sentence: "We Palestinians are only noticed still when we get loud."

At 12 o'clock we meet Palestinian president Mahmut Abbas

With Arafat we always met in a small room with Spartan furniture that was only decorated with the Palestinian flag, a picture of the Al Aksa Mosque and the unspeakable trash that foreign delegations had brought to him. Personally, anyway, he is supposed to have lived modestly. Mahmut Abbas fancies a representative room with massive brown leather furniture. He does not say anything new, holds maps up into the air that document the losses of territory of the Palestinians since 1948 and the current settlement plans by Israel, by which also the territories occupied in 1967 are being expropriated to a large extent. Every unilateral step by Israel he would refuse, he says. An exception was only the withdrawal from the Gaza strip. A two-state-solution could only be achieved via negotiations. The electoral victory of the Hamas also changed nothing to it. First of all, only the PLO was the internationally recognised representative of the Palestinian people and negotiation partner of Israel, not of the Palestinian autonomy agency. Second, the government was a government of the president and should in particular in these questions respect his role as the elected president of the Palestinians. Third, it was natural that the Hamas would recognise Israel, the Road Map and other international agreements as well as the renunciation to violence. By the way, Hamas had for more than one and a half years abided by the Cairo agreements not to commit any suicide attempts. The common Arabic initiative includes anyhow the normalisation of the relationship of the Arabic and Islamic states to Israel. One had to distinguish between the Hamas as an Islamic movement and the Hamas-led government that should be and was able to act pragmatically. The stop of international financial aids and Israeli transfers, the cutting-off of fuel supply by Israel and the intensified blockades had already led to a dangerous reduction of the whole economic life in the occupied territories. Abbas also in the discussions seems strangely calm. He talks about threatening economic and social collapse, of political chaos, when I ask, also of the fear that the missing salaries for the security forces could lead to conflict with the government, but he himself in light of these dramatic perspectives shows no sign of alarm.

Again in front of the Muqata, we accidentally meet Yassier Abbed Rabbo, the Palestinian initiator of the Geneva peace initiative that I had followed two years ago with some hope after all. He is in a great hurry. His opinion concerning the Hamas is clear: "The Hamas waits for the rise of the Arabic and the Islamic masses. That is its unique concept. Yet what we shall get will be at most the revolt of hungry, desperate Palestinian masses."

Yesterday, the temperature is supposed to have been 25° C. Today it is noticeably cooler and windy. Grey clouds are passing over Ramallah. My short-sleeved shirt (I trusted the Internet weather service) was not a good idea.

1: 25 p.m., Riwaq

Luisa of course had dragged us to drop in on her friends of the Palestinian cultural institute Riwaq, so much time does there have to be on the road to Anata. I am happy. Here I had been so happy one-and-a-half years ago. And the open warmth can immediately be sensed again. Dr. Zuad Aviry raved about the work of his institute that in the meantime has recorded 52,000 historic landmark buildings in Palestine on computer, not only to maintain their beauty and their Palestinian history and identity, but above all to make such buildings fit again for the socio-cultural development of contemporary society, disadvantaged people in particular and to use them in a live way. The "aggression of the bulldozers" did not only exist from the Israeli side; we should only look at the formless and accidental concrete of the new

buildings in the Palestinian cities. He is worried, his assessment is pessimistic, but he smiles and does not seem at all discouraged: "I supported the list Third Way at the elections. We do not know precisely what will come now. We are going towards dramatic times. Probably, extremism will increase. The Hamas will give up in two, three months. The problems are too great for it to tackle them. It can become very violent, and when the USA mobilise the Palestinian civil society against the government or want to set civil society in place of the government, it will be dangerous under our circumstances, a stupid, dumb play. These are dark times. But we won't give up, not we!"

After 20 minutes, we continue

Now Luisa has no time any longer. At three o'clock, we were supposed to be in Anata, for the Israeli-Palestinian meeting of the "Combatants for Peace". Yet at a small bistro in Alin Bireh, she at least does not begrudge us water or juice and a falafal with meat and salad (for me with a sharp source). In the economically barren Palestinian territories, even more so in this small city, the sudden raid by a mob of hungry Europeans is an unexpected stroke of luck for the owner. My friend, Helmuth Markov, who in Brussels is trying to starve himself through a diet, on a trip with Luisa would have no problem losing weight. In the bus, we eat strawberries unwashed out of the bag, certainly somewhat risky in these latitudes in terms of hygiene, but they taste marvellously like at home out of the garden in July, not like those that you can also buy the whole winter in the supermarket and can confuse in your mouth with cucumber or Dutch tomato.

On the road, Mike draws our attention to an Israeli blocking fence that runs by a far perimeter around a Jewish settlement within the occupied territories. By request of the settlers, the Israeli Superior Court of Law had decided that the fence had to run at least five hundred to thousand meters away from the settlements. This does not hold for Palestinian villages and cities. There the houses do often enough stand in the shadow of the six to eight meter high concrete, or whole apartment houses are even blown up for them and whole city districts separated from each other.

We are on time in Anata at 3 p.m.

The clouds have disappeared. Now the sun is shining, and it has become warm. The schoolyard in Anata has been chosen for the meeting, because the wall here, I estimate it at 8 meters in heights, leads across it and joins directly with the school building. To my right side, the construction works for its continuation continue. Four hundred people approximately have gathered here, Palestinian men and women, Israelis, who have come with busses. Muhammad Hasan Imran, the mayor, welcomes also us. In his brief speech, he describes the situation of the city: "Anata for over hundreds of years belonged to the Jerusalem district. Now, one part belongs to Jerusalem, the other, despite the great distance, to Ramallah. The Israeli master plan has turned the city into a ghetto that is surrounded by the wall of discrimination on all four sides. Unemployment stands at about 60%, the families are divided, two of the three schools were confiscated for the construction of the wall. We appeal to you to undertake common efforts for an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and for peace in the region and in the whole world."

Then there speak the people who up to recently still directed their weapons at each other and now want to fend with each other for an opting out of violence. Bassaam Aramin is a thirty or even already forty-year-old Palestinian with a moustache and short-shaved hair, getting somewhat grey at the temples, with broad shoulders, who

talks self-assuredly and during the translation into Hebrew looks proudly into the public. "Welcome to the playground of this Secondary School which the racism wall has turned into the Anata "secondary detention camp"... Almost every day, this playground is transformed into a playground of oppression, of tear gas and employment of fire arms by the occupying soldiers, the guardians of this wall." Bassaam Aramin talks about the armed and civilian struggle against the occupation, about the justifications from both sides for acts of violence and about his conviction that the struggle for a free, independent Palestine in the frontiers of June 4, 1967 is just. "I remember the first encounter with the Israeli soldier Zohar, Noam, Allik and others, full of distrust and fear. I can no longer believe that today. One year later, we are standing together here to say "No!" loudly and clearly to the occupation and the violence. I appeal to my Palestinian people and the Israeli people to join us in our peaceful struggle in order to end the occupation to the benefit of our two people."

I had already met Zohar Shapira during my last visit. He belongs to those Israeli soldiers and officers who refuse the service in the occupied territories. I notice again that he looks like a soldier out of the military picture book. Probably, this impression is important to me, because these courageous young people from Israel are anything else but outsiders. The change in his convictions is deep and moving: "In March 2002, I stood at the place, where in the King George Street in Jerusalem, a terrorist attempt had taken place. In between the shredded bodies and the torn-off arms and legs, I tried to take care of a six-year old boy who had been hurt gravely at his head. A couple of weeks later, I was drafted by the military operation 'Defensive Shield' in order to 'defend the motherland' as my commander said. One night, in the garden of a house in a village near Nablus, I found myself firing over the head of a seven-year-old girl that stood ten meters away from me. Only this proximity in time of the two events made it clear to me that Israeli violence brings forth Palestinian violence and that there develops this way a circuit of blood and revenge. I felt that I may not stop a war crime by committing another one. Together with two other soldiers and officers of my unit, the Matka'l command unit, we said 'No!'. 'No to the oppression of millions of innocent Palestinians, no to their deprivation of their rights, 'No!' to the absurd cycle of violence.' The decision never again to cross the green line (to the occupied territories), was my first step on my new way from fighter to peace fighter. A year ago, I dared another step. I decided to go over the green line, but this time not with the weapon in my hand, but by offering the hand for peace. With other Israeli refuseniks, we met Suleiman, Basem, Abed and other Palestinian fighters. Many of them for many years had been for many years in Israeli prisons, after they had fought violently against the occupation, a struggle for Palestinian liberty. We soon noticed that we had more things in common than dividing us. On this basis, we have founded together the "Combatants for Peace". I want to read to you a couple of lines from our declaration:

- We no longer think that the conflict can be solved with the means of violence,
- We believe that the spiral of violence won't end as long as we do not engage together for the end of occupation and all acts of violence.
- We demand the construction of an independent Palestinian state at the side of Israel. The two states will co-exist peacefully and securely with each other.
- We shall act non-violently and call upon the two societies to do the same.

During the last year, we have organised almost ten workshops, where we have dealt among other things with the definition of violence, the change from violence to non-violence, the significance of our personal biographies, the meaning of personal and collective freedom. Beyond that, we made speeches, in which members of the groups, Palestinians and Israelis, have told their stories and the story of the group in

order to counteract the cliché that 'there is no partner' and to put into question the present trend of unilateral politics. This long process has created a firm group, shaped confidence between people that not such a long time ago shot at each other."

In a similarly moving way, Naom Hayut talks about it: "I served four five years in the army, first as soldier in the Nachal command, then as train conductor and substitute company commander in the Nachal granite battalion. My world view was always against the occupants, but I thought that the decisions of the government and the army in the Israeli democracy were there for the civilians and that as a soldier I had to be the best: loyal, obedient, and professional. When the present Intifada broke out, I was at an officers' training so that I participated in most of the struggles in the occupied territories and not as a simple soldier. I was everywhere in the occupied territory during my service: In the Gaza strip and in the cities and villages of the West Bank. Every day, I secured barricades and road blocks, arrested wanted man, was stationed at control posts, occupied apartment houses and guided the search for arms and ammunition. During the operation 'Defensive Shield', I took part in mass arrests in the prisoner camps of Jenin and Tul Karem and in the conquest of Ramallah. At this time, where there were daily suicide attempts in Israel and I saw my soldiers wounded and dead, I felt more than ever that we had to lead this war in order to protect the lives of the Israeli civilians. This feeling made me blind to the fact that I fought every day against an unprotected civilian population. In the turmoil of events, I did not stop thinking of the lives of the Palestinians, however. Today I know that I had stopped thinking of the Palestinians as people, who had a right to dignity... After the end of my military service, I looked into a mirror and I no longer saw the Noam, whom I had known, before I had been drafted. I saw a monster, who was ready to imprison up every man between 15 and 50, regardless of what he had done; I saw a person who was ready, without batting an eyelid, to destroy family homes. I, the son of a farmer, who had been taught to protect fields, was ready to command the bulldozers, who tore out ancient olive trees, and ready to have no heart when a Fellaah cried over the property that had been forcibly taken from him... I am not a pacifist, and I know that there are times, where one has to use force in order to defend a person or a country. However, it is clear to me: If my father was arrested, in the middle of the night only because of his age or his address, I would rise against it. If I was not able to travel to my loved one in the near-by village, I would rise against it. If I was kept in isolation for months, as collective punishment, I would rise against it. If my village that lies next to a settlement with a swimming-pool received no drinking water, I would rise against that. In saying that, I want to express my deep sympathy with the Palestinians, who sit here with us, even though just that is their life reality, and who, like us, have decided for a non-violent struggle against the occupation and for co-existence in dignity."

Half-way through his speech, Near East daily life caught up with us in a ridiculous way. At first, there is a bang that is not too loud, then one that is deafening. A woman next to me immediately throws herself down on the concrete in a protecting manner. Most others are surprised and helpless just like I. Yet it was only children, who from a roof had thrown an imitation hand grenade. Noam Hayut had stayed calm at the microphone. He is surely able to distinguish harmless and more dangerous explosions. He smiles. Then he continues to talk on single-mindedly.

Before the next contributions, a Palestinian and a Jewish musician play together. In this region, a lot is possible, not however, in the official policy of the two sides.

Suleiman El-Khatib appears boyish, however, he is certainly also already thirty years old, he appears excited and quickly reads his speech from paper. Already as a twelve-year old, he has begun to participate in the resistance against the occupation. The property of his father had been expropriated for Jewish settlements. At age 14, he had been condemned to 15 years of prison, because he had attacked two Israeli soldiers. Ten years and five months, he spent in custody. The house of his family was sealed for the whole time (in many other cases, the Israeli army blasts the houses of the family members). The prison became his school. He learnt Hebrew and English from other prisoners, read books about anti-imperialist revolutions, but also about Gandhi and Nelson Mandela: "I started to learn more as well about more peaceful methods of the struggle, in order to draw world attention to our legitimate claims and the Barbarian nature and hostile nature of the occupation and in order to convince the Israeli public to support peace and the rights of the Palestinian people. This change was not a result of my sufferings in prison, but developed on the basis of the understanding that violence leads to violence and the cycle of revenge bars every way out." In 2004, Suleiman took part in the first Palestinian- Israeli South Polar expedition. For the first time, he met Israelis that were not soldiers or settlers. He asks: "Did I have to travel so far to meet Israelis? I think we should meet here, the way we do today."

Raed El-Hadar also has such a story: "I met many Israelis before, at unpleasant occasions and times, as a prisoner I met them as guardian, and the examining magistrate was unfriendly, to say the least. I have spent the larger part of my life in imprisonment, like most who are here with us today. But today I meet Israelis as equals and with a common hope for peace and justice between the two people."

This week is the Christian Easter. I am looking forward to the long week-end with my wife and my small daughter, but now I am happy to be here. The Jewish Passover celebrating the exodus from Egypt slavery and the Palestinian Day of Prisoners this year fall in our Easter week. Haim Weiss reminds us of that: "The fact that we have decided to celebrate both Passover as well as the Palestinian Day of Prisoners expresses the fact that the right of a people to liberty cannot be fulfilled on the basis of the right of another people... The conviction that my liberty can only hold up if it secures the freedom of those, who surround me, is new to me. In the long years of my service as tank soldier and officer in the occupied territories, I have not recognised that. I spent a large part of my military service at various checkpoints in Judea and Samara. For many days, I stood hour by hour at the check point and executed the orders that we received. If I look back to this time today, the worst seems to be to me that I did not only take their liberty to people on a daily basis, but also their identity... My decision no longer to serve at the checkpoints in particular and in the occupied territories in general is really the decision to see the Palestinians as people, of whom each and every one has a private and personal history, and I do not have the right to get involved in this story or to disturb it."

Luisa finally talks as well: "You, soldiers, armed fighters, perpetrators and victims, be our hope. Thanks for your lesson." She finds good and correct words. Yet already at this encouraging event, there again grows my feeling to be in the wrong region for hopes and solutions. Two German women, who had heard rather accidentally of the meeting and had spontaneously come here, approach me: "Why are you here?" I tell them that we – just like they themselves – want to be solidary with those who do not want to bow any longer to the violence on both sides. An American woman is delighted: "It would have been so important also for Congress deputies to be here."

4:30 o'clock, in Anata

But reality quickly catches up with us. The Town House of the city, only 100 metres away, where we want to talk with the Mayor, is not usable. Tear gas that Israeli soldiers used at large of the meeting and unnoticed by us against Palestinian youth, has entered all rooms. We have to wait before the opened doors until the gas has leaked out and during that time experience another lesson. Heavily armed soldiers, one with a tool for blowing off tear gas on his soldiers, roam through the hill side in between town-house and school, and Palestinian children and youth, partly in play, partly full of anger and hatred, throw stones at an armoured vehicle.

At a quarter to six, our conversation with the Fatah Mayor of Anata can finally really begin, even though the gas can still be smelled. In the sad assembly hall of the city, I see a tacky and macabre poster of the Hamas assembly yesterday, where the murdered Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin is carried on the shoulders of armed martyrs, while other fighters shooting carry the Palestinian flag towards the sun. In both societies, the resisters are a minority. It is a terrible dilemma. Jonathan, helicopter pilot, one of the refuseniks, whom I had met one and a half years ago in Brussels, says to me: "If you in Europe criticise the wall or report positively about our initiative, this is seen with suspicion by many people in Israel."

Half past six. On the way back to Jerusalem

Despite the general spring green you also notice in the mountainous landscape around Jerusalem that the Palestinians get much less water than the Israelis. Trees and bushes bloom lushly around the extended Jewish settlements. Poverty and lack of water also without the wall draw a visible frontier against the Palestinian villages and streets, whose inhabitants for lack of other possibilities also dispose of the miserable consumer refuse on the hillsides and in the villages. Deep red, the poppy shows in between plastic bags, scrap metal, and bottles. Now in the evening, the sheep herds are driven into the narrow pens next to the houses. The sun has gone, and it becomes noticeably cold. Behind a checkpoint, for four hours, five Palestinian men are waiting for us, whom the Israeli army has not let to the meeting at Anata. We can only speak to each other briefly. At the hotel, women of the International Women's Commission and Naomi Chazan, the former vice-president of the Knesseth, are waiting for us.

8 p.m., at the Ambassador Hotel

I have met Naomi Chazan several times in the last years, in Brussels, in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. She is a clever and sharp analyst and a reliable partner of the peace effort. She only thinks a solution is possible as a result of negotiations that ultimately should lead to an independent Palestine on the basis of the 67 borders. She consequently rejects the unilateral determination of "Israel's final border". 70 of the 120 deputies in the new Knesseth were an end to the occupation, but the concrete conditions gave hardly any ground for optimism: "Any one-sided solution is a disdain of Palestinian sovereignty; that also holds for the retreat from Gaza that took place. The West and Israel demand after the elections in Palestine, of course, I am not happy with their result, that Palestine should now react like a state, but it is not being treated like a state." The chairwoman of the international women's commission supplements: "Hamas, by way of the Israel and Western policy, would receive even more votes. The declared policy of these states is directed against fundamentalism and terrorism, but by its one-sided pro-Israel character, it promotes an opposite tendency. As long as the West does not apply the same standards to the Israeli and

the Palestinian policies and demands of Israel the realisation of the Road Map, nothing will change in this respect.”

April 11, 9:15, again on road to Ramallah

Again it goes along the wall that here runs in the middle of the street. Who really sees this wall, not only an individual piece, but its whole humiliating and destructive course as well as its links with the countless checkpoints, barriers and forbidden roads, will hardly be able to see it as a security fence. One should force the foreign minister of the EU and the USA to once spend a whole day at the wall around Anata, Qalqiliya and elsewhere. A line did not go out of my head the whole morning: Do you know the country, where grey walls blossom.

On the uneven road, riddled with potholes, I scribble these lines into my notebook:

Do you know the country, where on the limestone, grey walls blossom,
and barbed wire fences in long waves beat over mountains,
the apples with their flower breathe the smell of teargas,
and hope is only harboured by a hopeless dreamer.

Water runs uphill to richer cities,
Like the people it divides itself by passport,
It does not run into the wrong valleys,
there poverty reigns and grass withers.

The toys for the hatred of the children,
The thousand stones of each square meter of this country,
They fly helplessly against armoured cars.
Here only the cold weapons stay intact.

The poppy blooms red-red in between rubbish out
Of plastic bags,
Where also misery is at home three million times,
You won't get to know the country,
Because you happen not to be
On the wrong side.

Ten o'clock, Meeting with the new speaker of the Palestinian legislative council in Ramallah

It is a somewhat awkward meeting, because the EU refuses every kind of contact with the Hamas and its politicians. Nothing has been changed by the fact that officially not the Hamas, but the “Change and Reform List” it formed, presented itself at the elections. In Germany, in my own party even, as usual nobody will be interested in my trip and in my evaluations, but I have experienced often enough that such details on occasion are used gladly, by some, to construct out of the solidarity with a mistreated people an anti-Semitic or even anti-Israeli attitude, from the dogmatists within the party in order to cultivate their personal animosities. Yet we are united in that we want the dialogue and that the result of the Palestinian elections must be respected. Aziz Duaek, the new speaker (President) of the Palestinian Parliament is an orthodox Muslim, yet dressed elegantly and in a European way. He speaks English. The signal of his mobile phone is a religious chant. Since he is not prepared to shake hands with Luisa, the head of our delegation, we men also renounce to this gesture. After he has welcomed us and has praised our consequent

attitude against the occupation, he reads a prepared speech that distinguishes itself very little from what we have heard, for instance, from Abu Mazen. Israel even exacerbated the policy against the Palestinians these last few days. The USA as well as the High Representative of the EU, Solana, although they otherwise talk a lot about democracy, were punishing the Palestinian people for its democratic vote. Many Palestinian parliament members had been interdicted trips within the country and abroad. The Palestinians were well informed people, they had decided in a conscious and informed way for the Hamas at the elections. The Road Map was speaking of a Palestinian state capable of survival, yet in the meantime, there was hardly any interrelated square kilometre of land available for that. Palestine was split up by the walls, the barriers, the checkpoints and the forbidden streets into 64 enclaves, Bantustans, he adds. When we ask him for the demands of the EU for renunciation to violence, the recognition of Israel and the international agreements, he says: "We are the victims of violence, therefore, we cannot want violence. The PLO (of which Hamas is not a member) has not recognised Israel. Yet, what has come out of that in the last 15 years? Not even our most elementary rights have been respected, the Palestinian people has not had 24 hours of peace since then. And as for the recognition of the agreements: That is not a Palestinian problem. Israel does not recognise and respect them. Our people hate further concessions to Israel, as long as there are not finally also results for them. We want nothing more than an independent Palestine in the borders of 1967." That in my opinion is an important sentence. As the way out of the current situation, Aziz names two demands – respect of the members of the Palestinian legislative council as the real representative of the Palestinian people and serious talks with the Palestinian government. "Given that we are the democratically elected, legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, we can also achieve a solution if one talks and negotiates with us. Otherwise, the region will be de-stabilised even more; there will be radicalisation instead of democratisation and suffering not only here, but in the whole world, also in Europe. We do not wish for that, but it would be the reality." I know that he is right in many things, but the threat and the rejection of the role of the Palestinian president Abu Mazen, elected as well, and of the PLO are obvious.

Luisa tells him about yesterday's meeting of the "Combatants for Peace", and Chris Davis criticises that he had not heard a practical proposal for solution. I say that we are naturally against the sanctions. Yet also the recognition of Israel by the Hamas was overdue. In 1992, I had the chance to meet Nelson Mandela in Johannesburg. How often have I remembered that occasion, this man and his incredible radiation that could have turned me into a believer? The best part of his life had been robbed of him by the white racists. Only as an old man had he been freed. He and the black population of the country had had no ground for compromises, yet only his capacity to make them made a solution possible back then. I tell him about that and I ask, whether precisely this capacity was not lacking in Israel and in Palestina.

Without his prepared manuscript, we get to know another, less controlled, also passionate Aziz Duaek, and get to feel how empty hopes can be: "Please tell me: How long did the Holocaust against the Jews last? Three years, four - six? The Holocaust against the Palestinians lasts already six decades. Israel may have gotten the power in the region and concluded some peace agreements with states that are not real peace agreements, but it has not been able to make any friends with that. We are not stupid. Israel will never return the territory of 1967 and agree to a viable Palestinian state. The occupation is the worst form of slavery. We think that the concentration camps of the Nazis for the Jews are bad, but we have 64 concentration

camps for the Palestinians here.” One attack, one criticism of Israel follows the other. Many with a rational core! All together and in this form are a renunciation to any realistic politics and the search for a common solution in favour of the ideological mobilisation of the Palestinians. We object vehemently to the equalization with the Holocaust and the concentration camps of the Nazis. The description of the unacceptable situation and the policy against the Palestinians does not need such irresponsible comparisons. Aziz Duaek reacts cynically: “Ah, okay, we thus live under a friendly occupation and in friendly concentration camps.” It doesn’t help when we tell him one more time that it is completely sufficient to describe the situation in the occupied territories, especially the situation of the people, in a concrete way. Dr. Mahmoud Rahmadi, an additional Hamas member in the Palestinian legislative council (he studied in Italy) who up to then had assisted silently, apparently feels obliged to jump to the rescue of his chief: “We are only for resistance within the country that Israel has occupied in 1967, not outside of these borders. Nevertheless, Israel threatens us with retaliation and targeted killings. We want a Palestinian state only in the borders of 1967. That has to be recognised internationally and by Israel; then also recognition of Israel is possible. Who punishes Hamas and its democratic electoral victory with a blockade, will not only plunge the Palestinian people, but the whole region into misery.” He tells that he wanted to travel to Strasbourg recently upon invitation of the European council, but had not received an entry visa by France: “Representatives of dictatorial states may enter the EU. We, who have been elected in recognised democratic elections, are not allowed to.” He may be right. Our goodbyes are nonetheless short and frosty.

At half past twelve, in the same room

Our next meeting is friendlier. We sit opposite the chairman of the Fatah fraction in the Palestinian legislative council, Azam Al Ahmad, and six additional Fatah deputies. Yet one senses clearly their helplessness and frustration after their electoral defeat. Azam Al Ahmad is originally from Jenin and belongs to Arafat’s confidants. He speaks only Arabic, seems dry and bureaucratic and, moreover, talks in a longwinded way, with many repetitions. In summary: “The electoral result is problematic and dangerous. But we must accept it. The international community may not punish the Palestinian people for it. The sanctions are wrong. They won’t change the Hamas, they only mean additional trouble for the people. We assume, however, that the basis of the Palestinian legislative council will remain. The only international representative of the Palestinians in any event remains the PLO. The agreements of the EU as well have been concluded with it, not with Fatah or Hamas. The international quartet must exercise pressure and consider the PLO, not the government, as its negotiation partner. According to law, the president is chief of the executive and thus also the legitimate negotiation partner.” In response to my question for the reasons of the Fatah’s defeat, I receive a partly insignificant, partly characteristic answer. They were restructuring the Fatah to be able to react more quickly, they were analysing the mistakes (Which? Massive corruption and the lack of competence of many officials? We hear none of that.) and they had punished a few leaders. In the middle of his explanation, a woman enters the room, warmly embraced by Luisa. She is presented to us as director of a movie-making centre, and Azam al Ahmed smiles for the first time: “She was in opposition to us, but now she is on our side, because the new cultural minister of the Hamas is already proceeding with censorship against artists and journalists, in particular against women.” The movie maker is more concrete and precise than her new political friends, more passionate anyhow. The seven people do not dare fall her in the word. “The elections were fair and democratic, to the extent that elections can be fair and democratic

under an occupation. The votes for Hamas were protest votes against the corruption of the old administration, votes of fear, ideological votes, votes against the refusal by Israel and the international community. They were also meant as punishment of the international community for its ambiguous and unilaterally pro-Israel policy. The spiral of violence continues to be reinforced, and we all have to pay the price for that. The Hamas experiences now, however, that opposition used to be something else, much easier than government. Now they have to abide by the law, administer the country, pay salaries and provide for development. If the Hamas does not change its position it will contribute to Israeli unilateralism. Our goal has to be an independent Palestine in the frontiers of 1967, without any minuses, not even ten percent minus, otherwise there won't be any viable Palestinian state. The situation will become dramatic, not in the distant future, not in a year, but in the next two, three months."

3 p.m., meeting with Mustafa Barghouti

After the conversations in the parliament, we stayed for 20 minutes in the Al Sakakini cultural centre, in an old house, lovingly and authentically restored with Japanese help, built of limestone hewed manually that is owned by the cultural minister and is now threatened in its work, all the more so, since it is directed by a woman. Hamas ideology wants to strictly separate women and men, preferably limit women to their role in the family. Alcohol may no longer be served; the first events have been censored. Yet, by virtue of the international blockade, it does not receive any money anymore anyhow. On the lower floor, an exhibition of modern Latin American art can just be seen, realistic and abstract paintings, photo installations. However, I admired the old floors, doors, limestone stairways and forged window bars. At midday we ate in the lively old town of Ramallah in Angelo's restaurant that had recently been attacked by Hamas activists, who wanted to protest against alcohol being served and against women who went to eat here alone. However, as for now, still many women were sitting at the neighbouring tables and beer was also to be had: Taybeh Beer that is really good and on its etiquette even claims to be the best beer in the Middle East ("Finest Beer in the Middle East") and to be brewed in the German tradition.

I had also met Mustafa Barghouti on occasion of prior visits. The liberal medical doctor, on occasion of the presidential election in 2005, ran as the independent candidate against Abu Mazen and received at least 20 percent of the votes and, together with his group, the Palestinian National Initiative, also managed to get into Parliament. He is more optimistic than our other conversation partners, maybe because he has long been used to fighting, also against the corrupt Fatah leadership. Other than most Fatah leaders, he grew up in Palestine; he studied in Europe, however, and belongs to the intellectual middle class. The Fatah leaders, by contrasts, typically come from poor refugee families or from the Fedyahedin camps. The Israeli army destroyed Mustafa Barghouti's medical centre without any reason or consideration when entering Ramallah three and a half years ago, but he never gave up. When the Hamas president of the legislative council had reported on the good education of the Palestinians, this had been horrible, he said, because the educational plight was frightening. Yet, there had been in Palestine an irreversible process towards democracy, pluralism, and a democratic multi-party system. For the first time, there had been really democratic parliamentary elections. Without democracy on both sides, a permanent peace was impossible. Nonetheless, the Hamas electoral victory was dangerous. Israel and the international community were using it against the Palestinians, only exercised pressure on them and at the same time ignored Olmert's apartheid policy and the Barbaric Israeli bombardments of the Gaza strip. Israel wanted to provoke an armed reaction of the Palestinians. The Road

Map was dead, what was necessary, therefore, was an international peace conference. Olmert's intentions burnt down to a division into three or even into four of the Palestinian territories and the theft of large parts of the West Bank, including the Jordan valley. At the end of his talk, nothing remained after all from his beginning optimism. He accuses the international community bitterly that was plunging the Palestinian people into a civil war and was then going to feel justified in its anti-Palestinian and anti-Arabic attitude. "I do not understand why Europe is silent concerning the wall. What is the difference to a prison? In prison as well, the prisoner may use his cell and his wash room. For Israel, it is easier to have us in prison in between the wall than to re-occupy us directly. We even pay our prison internment ourselves."

Shortly after four

It has gotten colder within this one hour; the sun has disappeared again behind deeply hanging clouds. We drive back to Jerusalem. The next meetings are waiting already. The city centre is full of people when we depart. Nevertheless, I can imagine only with difficulty what the hundreds of street traders, owners of the many bistros and shops live on. Mountains of strawberries, peaches, vegetables and spices lie on hand-drawn carriages. I hardly see any buyers. We again buy strawberries and eat them unwashed.

At the checkpoint to East Jerusalem, a women soldier shouts into our bus with a laugh: "How are you?" Luisa, sitting in front, gives the right answer: "Bad, very bad. We saw the wall." In a brochure of the human rights organisation B'TSELEM, the Israeli information centre for human rights in the occupied territories, one of thousands of daily tragedies of the Palestinians is documented: "On February 26, 2002, Samar Hamdoun had to go to a medical examination. Her husband, Iyad, called an ambulance to bring her into hospital. The ambulance came to the checkpoint of their village Beit Furik, but the soldiers did not let it pass. Samar and Iyad thereupon took a cab to drive up to the ambulance. When they were 150 meters distant from the control post of their village Beit Furik, the soldiers ordered them to turn around. For fear that the soldiers would shoot if they drove on, the cab turned around and took a long detour by unfortified mountainous paths to get into the hospital in Nablus. On the road, Samar began to bleed and lost consciousness. What would have been a ten minute drive became a four-hour trip. When Samar arrived in the Rafidiya hospital, the foetus had died as a result of a burst placenta."

7 p.m. in the Ambassador Hotel

Of course, we were much too late. Of the discussion with two Israeli Knesset deputies from the Kadima and the Worker Party, we only got to hear their conclusion: It would be better if Israel withdrew unilaterally from the occupied territories and determined its final borders instead of having no solution at all.

Now we sit with Ravia Laham and others from the Mossawa Centre for the Arabic inhabitants of Israel, among them a German and a Belgian woman, who is employee of the EU Commission, who, however, took a sabbatical of a year to do this work. The Israeli Arabs have Israeli citizenship, they vote and are being elected (14 of the 120 Knesset members are Arabs); they pay taxes. Yet they are discriminated in many ways and the leader of the Party, "Our Israel", Liebermann, for several times has demanded their expulsion and their dispossession of their citizenship.

April 12, early in the morning

I have only been able to use my hotel bed for two hours tonight. The cab for the drive to the airport in Tel Aviv was ready at 2 a.m. I would very much like to take along on my travels to Palestine, Iraq, to the North Afghan Shebergan or to Kosovo the petty "Neues Deutschland" columnist, who denounced me and the other critics of human rights violations in Cuba as people who only were at home on large luxury airports and who no longer knew where they came from and by whom they had been elected. But such sleazy company would only increase my inconvenience. The security controls at the airport of Tel Aviv are so penetrating that I am uncomfortable already long before every trip to Israel. It is now half past three. For 20 minutes, we have been standing in the rosy dawn at the first checkpoint ("Your first line of defence" is written on a banner), about three kilometres from the terminal. My taxi has an East Jerusalem licence plate, the driver is a Palestinian. We seem suspicious. I want to stretch my legs. A guard remands me severely into a tent.

5:30 a.m.

I sit in the airplane. After a longer conversation between the driver and the security guards that I did not get we were allowed to continue, and at the airport, the checks were even surprisingly fast this time. Out of the window, I see a gigantic advertisement on the grass next to the departure lane: "Nokia. Connecting people." If this only worked also between Israelis and Palestinians...

Translated by Carla Krüger, 22-23 June, 2006