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From the Baltimore Sun

Terror tables turned for American journalist in Israel

By Peter Hermann

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JERUSALEM - The enormity of what happened back home didn't hit me until I arrived at my apartment near the Old City sometime early Wednesday morning, more emotionally drained than physically exhausted.

Taped to my front door was a small handwritten note on red stationery. It read: "Peter, is your family OK? My prayers are with you." It was from my neighbor, who also is my landlord's daughter.

I came to Israel two months ago to cover the land of terror attacks, only to be suddenly cast in the role of victim by simply being an American. I have spent weeks asking Israelis how they can possibly cope living under perpetual fear, and now they were asking me the same question.

And like them, I had no answers.

It was now me walking stunned along Jaffa Road, so frequent a target for terrorists that it is known here as the Street of the Bombers. It was now me desperately trying to call my parents in New Hampshire just to hear their voices, and unable to break through jammed phone lines.

I got countless e-mails from friends asking if I was safe. For the first time in a long while, I felt I was in the safest place in the world.

Over the past two months, I've gotten used to police toting machine guns guarding the edge of my adopted neighborhood, down the street from a community of Orthodox Jews and across from the Old City gates, which creates a sometimes volatile mix of cultures and religions.

I know my car's trunk will be searched when arriving at the mall, my bags will be inspected at every store entrance and my morning coffee can be sipped only under the watchful eyes of an armed guard stationed at virtually every outdoor café.

The dull thuds of police blowing up suspicious packages and streets shut down for hours because of security concerns have become annoyances rather than spectacles.

On Monday, I traveled to a small Israeli village near the Lebanese border to interview the family of the latest suicide bomber, who blew himself up in a crowded coastal train station, killing an elderly couple and an Israeli soldier.

I sat with the bomber's son-in-law, Samer Ghadban, an inquisitive Israeli Arab of 28 who condemned the act but understood the rationale. His Palestinian brothers in the West Bank are oppressed, he said, and are willing to sacrifice themselves and others to win their freedom.

He lives in Abu Snan, north of the West Bank city of Jenin, described by Israeli officials as a "suicide bomber's nest." It is where Mr. Ghadban's father-in-law is said to have trained. Yesterday, the Israeli army retaliated, rolling in tanks and shooting at Palestinian gunmen. They killed 11.

Mr. Ghadban turned to me. What, he asked, do people in the United States really think about suicide bombers? I told him we couldn't fathom anyone capable of such a deed, that Americans dismiss them as crazy fanatics. He nodded in partial agreement. But he said the situation for his people is hopeless. "What else can we do?" he asked.

There is a cruel double irony in this catastrophe that is showing up in the local media. Among the dead in New York were Israeli citizens visiting supposedly safe America while a group of 530 Jewish Americans who braved U.S. travel warnings were perfectly safe here in Israel.

"I would have been killed," one of the visitors, Marilyn Cranney, told the Jerusalem Post. She worked on the 70th floor of one of the World Trade Center towers, and normally arrives for work at 8:30 a.m. --- before the hijacked plane hit the north tower.

As the unimaginable tragedy unfolded nonstop on Israeli television Tuesday, pushing the latest violence in the Palestinian territories into obscurity, I visited the Sbarro's where 15 people were killed by a suicide bomber a month ago.

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Inside, workers who survived the blast had returned to prepare for the restaurant's grand reopening. It occupies a prominent corner in Jerusalem's commercial heart - its red, white and green sign a fixture, and thus a symbol of normalcy here.

The opening has been advertised for weeks, with the president and chief rabbi scheduled to attend. Survivors also were expected, a show of national unity and strength to prove Israeli resolve in the face of terrorism that has become a routine part of life here.

One person who said he would not attend was Arnold Roth, the father of Malki Roth, a promising 15-year-old who was eating with her best friend when the Palestinian bomber detonated his deadly nail-studded package. I sat down with him a week ago. Devastated, he kept telling me he could not express his feelings. But words tumbled out at a steady rate.

The act had taught him nothing of his Palestinian neighbors, he said, but he had learned much about his daughter, an active volunteer and accomplished flutist who had just started to write her own songs.

A week after Malki Roth's death, police gave Mr. Roth his daughter's nylon bag, which she used to hold her cell phone. Mr. Roth carefully opened the torn remains. Out fell a nail. "A calling card of the barbarians," he said.

Then, Mr. Roth removed the shattered remains of the Nokia phone. Still intact was a bright red nameplate. On that, Ms. Roth had written a small reminder to herself: "Don't think ill of others."

It is a sentiment not often heard in this war-ravaged slice of the world. I imagine it must be a scarce thought back home in America as well.

Peter Hermann is the Jerusalem-based Middle East correspondent of The Sun.

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