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## Friends or Enemies?

by Lesley Dawson

The news was full of Iraq and Saddam Hussein. We were told that war was imminent. The university called a meeting of all expatriate staff and told us that the decision to stay or to go was ours. Nobody would be blamed for leaving. The Americans were pulled out immediately, but the British consulate dithered about what they should advise. In the end we ignored them completely.

In our department we all decided to stay and had begun to cellotape up our windows against flying debris when bombs landed. Our Palestinian colleagues were concerned and occupied with plans for keeping their own families safe. Mohammed took the three of us on one side. His usual cheerful face was very solemn.

“If I could, I would take you all home with me to Gaza and we would keep you safe. However, I think it is best if you fly home to Europe. I have a feeling that things are going to get very difficult for foreigners.”

The Israeli occupying army gave warning of extended curfews and all those belonging to religious orders closeted themselves in their convents and relied on Palestinian members to buy bread in the short let up times in the curfews.

We wanted to stay in Bethlehem with our friends and neighbours and felt sure that they would not want us to run away. This was not to be, as overnight our neighbours began to look at us differently. We had become the enemy because our countries were fighting against Saddam.

President Arafat had pitched the support of the Palestinian Authority in on the side of Iraq, so all our local friends were committed to supporting them.

It was almost as if the years during which we had lived and worked alongside them counted for nothing. We had become aliens, considered not to be trustworthy. The suspicions that the local community had pushed to the back of their minds and almost forgotten, that secretly we supported Israel against them, now rose to the surface. Our countries in Europe were fighting against Saddam, having aligned themselves with Israel and Saudi Arabia. We were clearly the enemy.

The atmosphere changed and where once we had wandered freely through the narrow streets of the town and welcomed everywhere, now there were sideways glances, whispered conversations and even a few stones thrown. Two colleagues walking along a raised path overlooking a steep incline to the road below were hassled and pushed by local boys who would previously have looked after us like members of their own family. This seemed a foretaste of what was to come. What should we do?

One of our number did fly home to the UK as her passport was running out and another colleague, visiting family in the UK was unable to return. Prices for flights to Europe doubled, then tripled. Scenes at Ben Gurion airport and at the border crossings to Jordan and Egypt were chaotic with huge crowds pushing and shoving their families to the front of the queue.

Knowing we could never face our students if we left their community to struggle alone, a group employed by Save the Children Fund elected to stay, whatever. Half of us came under the British office and the others answered to the American office. It became quite a game, when we Brits were told "You must leave, we said "We are not going without the Americans" and vice versa happened when urgent messages came in from Washington.

All of us made our different preparations, being prepared to move into hotels in Jerusalem, making a sealed room out of an alcove behind a refrigerator and stocking up on Cremisan wine and calor gas.

In the end, most of us moved on mass to The Notre Dame Hotel, just across the road from the Old City in Jerusalem, within striking distance of the Dome of the Rock. After all, Saddam was not going to bomb the third holiest site in Islam, was he?