

At the border's gate

From Israel's Valley of Tears monument in the Golan Heights, a Syrian town is visible. Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler.

By HILLEL KUTTLER

JUF News' Israel correspondent Hillel Kuttler made visits in April to two places along Israel's border. June's dispatch was from Metulla, overlooking Lebanon. This month's report is from the northeastern Golan Heights.

MY GIRLFRIEND, MARCELLE, and I were out for a walk, due east from her brother's house on Kibbutz El Rom in the Golan Heights. The blue sky enchanted as we passed fruit orchards and cows grazing in meadows. Aside from two cars driving along the dirt road, no humans appeared. We turned left toward a historical site.

Boom! Boom! Boom! went the sky, one thump every half-minute or so, as if heralding a thunderstorm.

A realization struck.

"It's the Syrian civil war," I told Marcelle.

We had just reached the Valley of Tears monument to a pivotal battle in Israel's defense against Syria's invasion in the Yom Kippur War. At the ridge's edge, a Syrian tank, facing uphill, remained where an Israeli tank had halted its progress 44 years earlier. An opened hatch revealed soda cans and candy wrappers of more recent vintage.

The Syrian front has been quiet for decades—during peace negotiations I covered in the mid-1990s, Israeli delegates trumpeted Syria's keeping it the calmest of all Israel's borders—but the country's been at war with itself since 2011. The fighting

has killed a half-million Syrians and made refugees of a million more. Syrian President Bashar Assad has dropped chemical weapons on his own people multiple times.

A few weeks earlier, I'd visited Tel Saki, further south in the Golan and site of another memorial to a key Israeli tank-battle victory in 1973. From Tel Saki's ridge, I saw a vast white tent below, about a mile away: a field hospital that Israel opened years earlier to treat Syrian civilians wounded in the war and those with illnesses and conditions needing attention.

Tel Saki was utterly quiet on my visit, but the Valley of Tears was decidedly not.

I grew up in New York, and as an adult lived in Washington and Baltimore—all cities with far too much violent crime. Yet, never did I hear gunfire there.

Nothing about the sounds of Syria could be easily discerned. There were neither fire nor clouds of smoke to reveal where an air bombing or missile strike might have landed. I couldn't see a fighter plane to indicate the booms' source, nor be sure from which directions the blasts came.

As to *what* they were? War, of course.

For a second, I recalled then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin's reported quip, early in the Iran-Iraq War, that he wished both sides success. I caught myself. Yes, let the bad guys of all parties in Syria knock each other off—but leave the civilians alone, for goodness sake. I didn't know any Syrians, and I certainly didn't wish civilians harm.

Being on the Israeli side, so close to danger that it rang in my ears, was unnerving.

Here was as gorgeous a spring day as one could wish for: lush greenery everywhere, flowers blooming, the sun out. A few hundred yards off, past the stone monument and the two abandoned tanks, down the hill and across a field, I saw Israel's border fence with Syria. Clearly visible beyond it were Ufaniya, Khan Arnabeh and, further south to my right, Kuneitra. In those Syrian towns I made out houses, apartment buildings, water towers, dirt paths, utility poles, and a mosque. No people, though.

For all I knew, life there could've been proceeding normally just then, a serene spot in a shattered country. Maybe, the blasts struck somewhere else. It could be that thousands of such war-free vistas exist throughout the land.

But what if, as I stared their towns' way, the people were then crowding into bomb shelters; furiously prying open locks to basement doors to escape, like in *The Wizard of Oz*, as the tornado struck; giving first aid to wounded neighbors; assessing holes in their cars and roofs; praying for their lives?

The devastation Syria continues to endure at its own hands remains unfathomable.

For the foreseeable future, the war will continue, with bombs falling and Syrians' lives ending. Israel will continue helping the hurting civilians of a so-called enemy.

As we left, the booms reigned. Their effect grew fainter with each step. ■

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