

Fieldwork and Emotion

Ian S. Lustick

University of Pennsylvania

Appearing in: *Stories from the Field*
A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science

Edited by Peter Krause and Ora Szekely

Columbia University Press, 2020

There is nothing like being in the field to teach the comparative political scientist about politics. No matter how well equipped one might be by instructors, the “literature,” prior theorizing, or a rich conceptual repertoire, a genuine encounter with politics plunges the researcher into a tsunami of potential observations that can be as mysterious and confusing as they are potentially instructive. Indeed the encounter with the field is so saturated with learning opportunities that what can be registered by the thin cortex of the researcher’s brain—where cognition, cogitation, calculation, and rational deliberation occur—is wholly insufficient. Learning, especially in the field, also takes emotional engagement, and the ability to notice and track the character of that engagement.

In this note I will share three specific encounters during fieldwork in Israel/Palestine conducted regularly (if not always conventionally) since 1969—encounters that taught me as much as they did precisely because of the emotional reactions they triggered in me.

In the late summer of 1969 I was a junior at Brandeis University, spending six months at a branch of that university located in Jerusalem known as the Jacob Hiatt Institute. One weekend my girlfriend, also a Brandeis student, and I travelled from Jerusalem by “tramp” (hitch-hiking), collective taxi, and hiking to what in those days was a relatively inaccessible but not too distant beach on the Mediterranean—*HaHof HaYarok* (The Green Beach) south of the city of Netanya.

We had only been in the country for two months. Our Hebrew was poor. We brought some food; and camped out under a rudimentary shelter on the beach, watching a rider gallop along the surf as the sun set. The next day we spent sunning and swimming. There were no services at the mostly deserted beach, though there was someone acting as if he were a lifeguard. We struck up conversations with a large family having a picnic—a family that included four men about our age, or a bit older. It was exciting because, for the first time, we found Israelis ready to respond to our broken Hebrew, in Hebrew, rather than see us as an opportunity to practice their broken English. While we were getting Hebrew lessons, we were giving swimming lessons. None of the men could swim, and we were, gently, showing them how.

They brought out food to share. It being the sixties, I had brought my guitar. Soon we were sitting on the beach. I was playing and singing. We were all eating watermelon. As we ate

and talked we learned, to our surprise, that these people were Arabs—from Nazareth, the biggest Arab town in Israel. One of the men proudly described his work as a teacher. We explained, of course, that we were students from the United States—Jewish students. This led to some basic political and historical questions being raised about, well, why did the Jews come to this country anyway. As part of our response, I played the song, “Dona Dona,” a Yiddish folk song translated into English about slaughtered calves and why, metaphorically, Jews had fled, or should fled, from Europe. “Only those,” goes one verse,” “who treasure freedom, like the swallow, have learned to fly.”

We spent a wonderful afternoon in this way, perhaps understanding about 50% of what we were trying to say to one another, until it began to be time to think about leaving. We agreed that they would give us a ride to the main road, and that we would be coming to Nazareth soon to visit them. But as we were packing up, they discovered something was amiss with their car. While they were tinkering with the engine, I was approached by the “life-guard” (or security guard, I was not sure who he was, really). He asked me to come with him to the part of the beach about fifty yards away near the parking lot.

Standing there was an older couple, from France. They, and the life-guard, had been watching us with growing concern and now alarm. “Do you know,” he said to me, “who those people are that you are with? Do you realize they are Arabs?” “Yes,” I said, “they’re from Nazareth. One of them is a teacher.” “And I bet,” he continued, “that they have offered you a ride.” “That’s right, they have,” I responded. “They’ll drive us to the main road where we can tramp or take a bus.” “Look,” he said, “don’t do it. Don’t do it on any account. This couple here,” he said, motioning to the older folks, “have offered to drive you to a bus station.” The older couple approached us, with expressions of deep worry on their faces. “Please, come with us, right now.” The man said, with what sounded like a Yiddish accent. “Don’t worry. Just say goodbye and we’ll leave.”

“But we already agreed to go with them. They’re fine people. We spent the day with them. There’s no problem.” “Look,” the life-guard said, again. “You don’t understand. They are Arabs, they will kill you and rape your girl-friend. It happened recently to tourists who accepted a ride from Arabs.” “That’s ridiculous,” I told him, “and it would be terrible if suddenly I told them we had changed our minds.” I went back to talk to my girl-friend, who was wondering what this was all about. As I told her, we noticed that our Arab friends were eyeing us with distress and perhaps anger. “He’s telling you not to go with us,” one cried to us, “because we are Arabs.”

We didn’t know what to do, but we leaned toward sticking with the plan to leave with our friends. But then the life-guard and the older couple again called us over. When we told him we were staying, they raised the stakes. “You,” said the life-guard, talking directly to me. “You might take the risk. It’s your life, but how can you put your girl-friend in danger.” Exactly,” said the older man, “you must think, what would her father say? What would you tell him if something happened to her.”

And that's when my fear overcame my judgment; when my ignorance took its toll on my humanity. She and I looked at each other. Then I looked at the life-guard. "OK," I said, "we'll go with you." When we went to gather our things, the Arabs showed that they were hurt and deeply upset. They knew exactly what had happened, and they knew we had chosen to distrust them, to think the worst of them. "You don't believe I'm a teacher, do you?" cried the teacher. "And you'll never come to visit us either." "Yes," I said, "we do and we will, but we just have to go now, we can't wait for your car to be fixed." We moved quickly to the car of the older couple and got in. Torn between fear and guilt, we left our swimming students and our Hebrew teachers insulted and abandoned.

Our trip back to Jerusalem was quiet and sad. A part of that sadness—born of fear and ignorance—has never left me. And the teacher was right. We lost the paper with their names and address. As quickly as we realized we had made a terrible mistake, we also realized there was no way to apologize or make things better, no way to ever make contact with these people again.

All I could do was learn from the experience, and I believe I did, and most of what I learned was from what I felt—how trapped I felt into acting brutally toward people who had offered nothing but friendship and assistance; how ashamed I felt to see how my ignorance and fear could be manipulated by others; how tempted I felt to avoid the shame by believing that we had actually been in danger; how frustrated I felt that structures of inequality could produce dilemmas and cruelties that the best of intentions could not overcome; and how much anger could be generated in a situation where injustice and inequality is hidden, undiscussed, and unacknowledged.

In the years that followed I determined that studying the Arab minority inside of Israel was just too difficult and too painful a problem for someone, like myself at that time, who believed in a "Jewish and democratic state." Instead I focused entirely on Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. My first publication was a paper I wrote that semester in Israel on "What West Bank Arabs Think." And when I returned to the country in 1973 for dissertation research, my topic was the impact of the occupation on Palestinian politics in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the possibilities created for peace based on an independent Palestinian state.

But the field can be as cunning as history. In the midst of my work in the West Bank, in October 1973, the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War erupted. Continuing my research on the military government in the West Bank-Gaza was impossible. Searching for another topic, I was led, ineluctably, to the military government that had ruled Arab citizens of Israel from 1948 to 1966, and then to the larger question of how Arabs citizens of the country were controlled and manipulated by state and parastatal institutions operating on behalf of "Jews," not "Israelis." That was the project that became my dissertation, and my first book—*Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority*.

I did not dedicate the book to those Arabs on the beach, though I wanted to. Publishing a book on this topic in the United States was so controversial that almost every major academic press in the country refused to review the manuscript. Even my eventual publisher, the

University of Texas Press, insisted on careful control of what was said in the preface and acknowledgements so that, as much as possible, my credentials as a Jewish Zionist could protect the press against pressures that threatened to prevent publication even after the contract had been signed and revisions completed. I always hoped that somehow those Arabs on the beach, or perhaps their children, might know of what came, in part, from what they suffered that day. The sadness associated with the groundlessness of that hope is another emotion triggered by that episode no less instructive than the others.

Later during that half year in Israel/Palestine I had my first encounter with the radical irredentism that Israel's victory in the Six Day War had triggered, especially among young religious Jews. My first reaction to hearing such ultranationalist talk was revulsion. I was, after all, a stalwart liberal, a fierce opponent of the Vietnam War. I was a Jewish nationalist, but a liberal Jewish nationalist, committed to imagining Jews as a peculiar nation precisely because of their universalist values, and anxious to infuse, ala Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, real human meaning into Jewish rituals and practices more commonly imagined as narrowly parochial.

But one day, travelling through the West Bank from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and Masada, I felt something strong and peculiar, indeed shocking. This land I was seeing, this really was where my people had been born; where the patriarchs lived; where the Kingdom of David was established; and where the Maccabees had fought the Syrian-Greeks. How wonderful it was, how marvelous, that after all the centuries of wandering and suffering and persecution, after the Holocaust, we Jews had gained something so special. OK, I said to myself, I realize it was taken from Arabs, and that by strict terms of justice, it should be relinquished, or at least shared. But why not, I thought, why not, just this once, should Jews not get something for themselves, maybe even a bit more than they deserved—to rule this land; to inhabit it as a Jewish country? How simply wonderful that would be!

The feeling did not last long, and I can no longer conjure it up. But for years I could, and still I can at least remember having it. That I could experience so powerful an emotion helped me understand how Gush Emunim settlers—those who formed the vanguard of the more than 700,000 Jews now living east of the 1949 Armistice Line-- feel all, or at least much of the time. That feeling and the memory of that feeling, helped tremendously in research for my book on what Gush Emunim settlers believe, how they think, and how they feel about the land they have taken from others. Without it, *For the Land and the Lord* would not have been written. I simply would not have been able to talk calmly to the people I was studying, to read their intricate and voluminous internal debates, or to understand how love and dedication can co-exist and even dominate one's knowledge of the injustice one is committing.

The third episode occurred some years later. I was travelling back to Jerusalem from Nablus in a collective Arab taxi, having spent the day talking with activists in the "Palestinian National Front"—a communist party linked organization, banned by the military government, that in the early and mid-1970s was committed to building a non-belligerent but independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

The car was a Mercedes. I was seated next to the window on the passenger side in the middle row of three rows of seats. My Arabic was not good, but I was looking forward to listening to what the seven middle-age Palestinian men in the car would be talking about. It was obvious that I was an American, or at least not an Israeli.

We started out shortly before sunset for the hour and half drive down the mountain spine of the West Bank--a twisting, dramatic road, with spectacular views, usually driven at hair-raising speed and with as much brash disdain for other drivers as possible. In those days we could be fairly confident of making the trip uninterrupted by Israeli checkpoints, police, or army patrols.

But this trip turned out to be different from any other. The driver had the radio tuned to music. There was no talking. We were driving south. The sun began to set, drenching the hills and the inside of the car in a wonderfully eerie, reddening light. But it wasn't the light, per se, or the silence of the passengers and driver, or the controlled rocking of the car, that started to feel unusual. It was their combination with the music. It was "Arabic music"-- pure instrumental, no singing, with a steady, throbbing beat. It was heavy, masculine, melancholy, and, powerfully erotic. I felt myself completely engulfed by the music, its effect deepened by the lengthening shadows, the red red sky, and the silence of the men in the car with me. It seemed that the eight of us were in a kind of time warp, or space ship, completely separated from the rest of the world. We seemed as riders in a camel caravan, moving through a mysterious and awesome terrain, experiencing a force and a presence as intimate and real as it was ineffable.

But was I just imagining this? How could I feel what these men, so different from me, were feeling? Maybe this mood, these sensations and emotions, were just in my head, products of a naïve Orientalist fantasy. The others were quiet, perhaps, because they had things on their mind—jobs, money problems, family issues, politics, aches and pains. Who knew? All I knew was that I had never felt anything like this before, and had never felt so close to a group of people who were, in fact, complete strangers.

As we approached Ramallah, darkness spread over the landscape. The music stopped. The car was quiet for several minutes. Then the man beside me turned and spoke, in clear and perfect English: "Now," he said, "you know what it is to be an Arab man."

And perhaps I did. And if I can't still feel what I felt then, I can remember feeling so, and that has connected me to the Middle East—its peoples and its predicaments. So has the fear and shame that surged within me at *HaHof Hayarok*, and the memory of those emotions. The same is true of the swelling attachment and love for the "Jewish" Land of Israel that sprang up with me on that ride to the Dead Sea, and my memory of these feelings. To this day these connections enliven my study of politics in the region and help me understand both the fascination and confusion of my students.

I read my old field notes amazed at the detail I accumulated; and how little of it I recall; but the emotional realities I experienced; they have never left me.