

Israel's Dog and Pony Show

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I recently jumped at the chance to take an all expenses paid helicopter ride over Israel and part of the West Bank.

The trip was courtesy of The Israel Project (TIP) which describes itself as a non-profit, non-partisan group working to impact world opinion for the sake of Israel's security.

The helicopter ride is meant as an "educational tour" for journalists and was inspired by George Bush, the former US president, who took a similar ride and reportedly said it opened his eyes to just how vulnerable Israel is.

The tour operates twice a month and has taken up over 1,400 journalists.

We (AJE cameraman Brad McLennan and I) met our guide and fellow journalists early in the morning, were bussed to an airport near Tel Aviv, treated to breakfast, and (after a security check that happened only to involve Brad and I and not the other two Israeli journalists) were taken up on a civilian helicopter for 45 minutes.

In mid air, an information pack was given to each of us - a neat little 80-page handbook explaining why we were really here.

To boil it down - Israel, the argument goes, is small and under threat from every side so the borders they have imposed are out of necessity not choice.

Hence the name of the tour nicely laminated on the front of the pack - "Defensible Borders: Strategic Options for Israel's Security".

Don't look down

Throughout the flight, our tour guide used a variety of maps, statistics, pie charts, drawings and graphs to explain the reason for the separation wall (deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice).

We have all heard the reasoning that it prevents terrorist attacks but what our guide was trying to explain was that it has swallowed up Palestinian land only in areas which would have exposed Israel and posed a security threat.

The wall has in fact taken 12 per cent of Palestinian land and drastically changed the landscape of Jerusalem creating a de facto border where Israel would like to see one and not where international law deems one should be.

If we were looking down we would have witnessed this reality, but instead most in the

helicopter were busy looking at the diagrams.

What is amazing is that in our 45-minute ride we managed to avoid flying over any of the 120 illegal Jewish settlements that have been built on Palestinian land in the West Bank.

Not a word was said by our guide about these settlements - neither does it get a mention in our info pack.

Below is a taster of what we did see - the town of Modi'in which sits next to the settlement of Modi'in Illit (which I couldn't film because of the route we took).

The other argument made by our guide was that the separation wall (which he points out will be six per cent concrete and 94 per cent electronic wire fence when finished) was not a permanent international border but rather a defensive one.

Plans, he said, are being made for electronic key cards so that Palestinian farmers left outside the wall can access their lands now on the "Israeli" side.

When I asked our guide why Israel is making long-term plans for a border he just finished telling us was only temporary, he answered "because one day it will be permanent".

It's a simple strategy and one Israel uses unapologetically - creating facts on the ground they call temporary (because in theory they are still negotiating over these facts) while carrying out actions that would make a final settlement based on anything other than what they have already created almost impossible.

The middle of the tour involved landing in the southern Israeli town of Sderot. Here the guide explained how it was in fact Hamas that has imposed the siege in Gaza, a point I challenged him on ...

The Israel Project do not hide their aim - shaping media coverage of the conflict. This is after all is a battle for land where the court of public opinion matters.

To preserve Israel's interests (to secure a Jewish state with borders of its choosing) an effort must be made to explain and justify to the world the process by which that state is being created.

But the changes happening come at the expense of Palestinian statehood, and that is clear to see for all those who choose to look down.

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