What does the correspondent remember from the assignment? A mixture of the professional and the personal. Stories that went well, beating the competition; delays or equipment failure that weren’t your fault, but which cost you all the same; chance encounters; jokes; sometimes, especially in war zones, danger. All these memories are made up of different impressions. Sometimes, long after the story of the day is gone and forgotten, these details can return to give a fuller picture of the situation than ever the pressure of meeting a daily deadline would permit.

From 2002 to 2004 I lived and worked in the Gaza Strip as the BBC’s correspondent there. At the time, I was the only international journalist based in the territory. Arriving in August 2002, with the second Palestinian *intifada*, or uprising against Israel, almost two years old; with the smoking ruins of September 11th still shocking a world which had witnessed them less than twelve months before; and with the invasion of Iraq seen as inevitable; I found myself covering the coal face of a conflict which lay then at the heart of international diplomacy. Military action against Iraq may have been very much on the agenda, and would follow in the spring of the following year – but Washington’s plans to remake the Middle East also included a concerted diplomatic drive to bring peace to the Holy Land between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean.

I could see the sea from my office window. Some of the panes then were criss-crossed with tape, designed to prevent them from shattering in an air raid or rocket attack. The impression I retain most strongly from that time, from that vantage point several floors up above Gaza City, was not of what I saw, but what I heard. There were the cries and loudspeakers of fruit sellers and water carts below; at times of Israeli military operations, there were explosions; once, confusingly, there was even a small earthquake during an Israeli incursion. The strongest impression I have of that time, though, was the relative silence of the city on Friday morning, the start of the Muslim day of rest. Cars were few. Shops were shut. Later, life returned: first in the call to prayer in the middle of the day, rising from the minarets across the city. This was followed by the Friday sermons, broadcast, like the call to prayer, from the mosques’ loudspeakers. They complemented and completed each other: fervent, sincere, inspiring expressions of faith amongst a people facing great hardship.

I might be preparing to leave town for the weekend. Unlike almost all of the million plus people whose scrubby strip of coastal land I had made my home for a couple of years, I could. Jerusalem was a chance to use the superior studios to work on a TV or radio feature; the chance to catch up with other members of the international press corps. My arrival in the Jewish west of the city, especially in winter, might happen as sundown approached – and with it, the start of the Jewish Sabbath. That too was marked with a sound as distinctive as the call to prayer, the sounding across the city of the siren, similar to the ‘all-clear’, which marked the arrival of the holy day.

There are many privileges to being a foreign correspondent, especially if you possess in spades this frequent pre-requisite for the role: wanting to see and learn about as much of the world as possible. My Friday journey gave me a rare perspective. Few other people were permitted to make it, short though it was. The different sounds came to symbolize for me the two different peoples and societies among whom I worked – and the faiths, such an important part of their separate identities, which helped to define who they were.

These were identities which seemed to reveal themselves the longer one talked to anyone on either side. Where the demands of a news story could be satisfied by just talking about what had happened that day – often, at that time, an act of deadly violence – or by getting a response to the latest initiative in the ‘peace process’ (it seems hard to imagine now, but such a thing was thought to exist then) in the form of vox pop or official statement, any story digging for something in greater depth often to unearth something else. These were older forces: forces of faith, not of man-made diplomacy, or warfare. This was the bigger impression, formed of countless smaller ones, which I took with me when I left.

In the decade or so since, I have continued to visit reasonably frequently: including twice last year to work on my book, *Headlines from the Holy Land: Reporting the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, which is published this autumn. What has unfolded since then has tended to confirm the sense I started to have then: the nationalist secular politics of the second half of the 20th century were giving way to something else, something with a stronger religious element.

This has implications for the way in which the conflict is covered. It has implications too for one of the main reasons that the conflict attracts the level of coverage it does: the colossal amount of top-level diplomatic resources which have been expended in seeking, so far unsuccessfully, a lasting solution. Those attempts have been largely based upon a return to the borders established in the ‘Six Day War’ of 1967, when Israel stunned its enemies, and the world, with the lightning and deadly effectiveness of striking first when its foes were ranged round about – seeking to crush the fledgling Jewish state then not even twenty years old. It was then that Israel occupied the West Bank; the Gaza Strip; and the Golan Heights – territories it still holds today, almost half a century later. The BBC’s Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, whom I interviewed for the book, and who is himself the author of a history, ‘Six Days’, of the 1967 war, sees this as a turning point. ‘Now what’s changed is that it’s a religious conflict now – the growth in religious Zionism,’ he told me. ‘There was always religious Zionism from the beginning, but it got kick-started when they suddenly had the West Bank to colonize.’

The veteran Middle East correspondent, David Hirst, who, as a stringer in Beirut, covered the 1967 war, also sees that conflict as a seminal moment. In his book, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, he described a ‘Zionist renewal’, which, in the wake of Israel’s capture of the Western Wall and the rest of the Old City of Jerusalem, ‘gushed forth…in a torrent of biblico-strategic, clerico-military antics and imagery’. Looking back now, with the benefit of almost a half-century of hindsight, Hirst identifies something else, too. ‘The ’67 war was clearly a landmark in the rise of Islamism in the region,’ he told me in an interview for the book. ‘You couldn’t see it at the time, but it clearly was.’ Nor was this sense of religion confined to the region’s inhabitants. Richard Lindley, reporting for ITN from the Old City, as throngs of Israelis entered to visit the newly-captured Western Wall, was moved to quote from the Old Testament: a verse from the book of Jeremiah which concluded, ‘thy children shall come again to their own border.’

More was changing at the time than just the region’s de facto borders, significant though that change was, and enduring as it has proved to be. For the Middle East from which I reported in the years after September the 11th was changing in another way, too. Those interviews which went beyond the ‘what happened – what did you see’ for a news stories almost invariably drew responses related to religion. Specifically, conversations would lead to claims that God had granted people the land. Therefore, not only was it theirs by right, but to cede any of it was tantamount to an abandonment of faith: frequently such an important part of both Israeli and Palestinian identity. The Gaza in which I lived and worked was different from Gaza today. Firstly, there were still Jewish settlements there. These were dismantled, and their inhabitants removed, in some cases by force, in the summer of 2005. Secondly, the Palestinian Authority was in charge of the territory, not Hamas. Thirdly, the sheer scale of the destruction wrought last summer during Israel’s ‘Operation Protective Edge’, and the relatively limited amount of rebuilding which has occurred since, means that large parts of the city look different, too. Yet it was during this time that the Gaza of today was beginning to take shape: a Gaza which was supposed then – it seems hard to imagine now – to form part of an independent Palestinian State.

That, of course, is a diplomatic challenge which has been many times risen to, and never overcome. In 2003, the Roadmap to Middle East peace was launched with huge, high-level, involvement of presidents and prime ministers. It was one such attempt. Because of the colossal amount of political capital expended, it became a massive story. Yet the peace process underway then, as with those since, did little to address the issue of land as something more than just an economic or agricultural commodity – something, in other words, which might, be given up in return for peace. As United States Ambassador to Israel at the time, Daniel Kurtzer was a key figure. Now a professor of Middle Eastern Policy studies at Princeton, he believes that, ‘diplomacy has so far proven incapable of figuring what to do about religion.’ In consequence, he concludes, ‘I haven’t seen any success yet in integrating this move towards religion into the diplomacy trying to resolve the conflict. It’s a real challenge.’

The task is made all the harder by the restrictions placed upon diplomats. With both the United States and the European Union having declared Hamas a terrorist organization, representatives of the governments of those countries are not permitted to have contact with the group that runs Gaza. One effect of this, which emerged clearly during the course of my research, is that international journalists are able to talk to a wider range of people than pretty much anyone else involved in the conflict. Israelis’ and Palestinians’ opportunities for talking to each other are limited. In the case of Gaza, subject to blockade, they are all but non-existent.

The result is that the reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a special importance. It is, of course, frequently the subject of sharp criticism. The social media age has made it easier for that criticism to turn into instant abuse. Even seasoned international correspondents describe pressure and scrutiny covering this conflict which is unequalled elsewhere. The demand for context to satisfy requirements of balance is insatiable. In their book on the Six Day War, Winston and Randolph Churchill (grandson and son of the wartime Prime Minister) addressed that by going back to Biblical times in their introduction. You can hardly do that in a few hundred words for the world news pages, or a minute forty-five for the evening bulletin. There are other pressures today, too. Foreign news budgets are increasingly stretched; stories in the wider region mean that Jerusalem is no longer the news hub it was ten or twenty years ago. The absence of a peace process means that a degree of editorial fatigue has set in, shaken off only when there is an explosion of violence and bloodshed.

For all that, the Holy Land remains a place, where, as the former Reuters Bureau chief Crispian Balmer puts it, ‘any journalist worth their salt wanted to come and try their time in.’ It is as well they do. For as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict defies solution, it will cause tension and confrontation in other parts of the region, and the world. However much it confuses and frustrates, we need to know what is happening there – and journalists are better placed than anyone else to tell us.

*James Rodgers is Senior Lecturer in Journalism at City University London, and a former BBC correspondent in Moscow, Brussels, and Gaza. His new book ‘Headlines from the Holy Land’, is published by Palgrave MacMillan*