

Police chief trains in Israel

Wells tours Israel on eight-day antiterrorism program

By Tom Pilla Times Staff

In late January, Police Chief Richard Wells spent eight days in Israel studying antiterrorism techniques and strategies as part of an Anti-Defamation League-sponsored program.

Wells' group, which included Boston area police chiefs, federal agents, a rabbi and other ranking law enforcement personnel from the region, traveled under the care of Israeli security forces to disputed territories, large and small cities, holy sites and training compounds. They received presentations from Israeli security, defense and police officers, border patrol, religious leaders, journalists, students, parents and American law enforcement living in the country.

The program began officially in 2011, though the ADL has been sending American law enforcement officers to train in Israel since the 9/11 attacks.

The main focus of Israeli police, according to Wells, is on terrorism pre- *continued on Page 15*

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vention, while in the U.S. police forces tend to prioritize crime fighting. Learning from those who have terrorism top-of-mind is one of the rationales for this program, but the point is also to strengthen the relationships between regional law enforcement who may be working together in the future, according to the director of ADL in Boston, Robert Trestan.

“We’re bringing people together who live and work in the same area,” said Trestan. “The feedback we get is that after these experiences those professional relationships are much stronger.” He noted that, although Milton itself may not be as likely a target as downtown Boston, local police in the region of an attack, like the Marathon bombing, need to be ready to assist.

Wells said that one of the biggest takeaways from his trip was the level of preparedness the Israeli forces undertook. He also talked about how impressed he was with their degree of restraint in tense situations, particularly near the Old City section of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, arguably the epicenter of the millennia-old religious conflict in the region.

“On Friday night [during shabbat], there can be 60,000 people at the Western Wall, with 2,000 police officers,” said Wells, describing the tension of the scene. “People throw rocks, even [Molotov cocktails].”

The group spent a day in session at Ben Gurion Airport as well as at the National Police Academy, a facility that Wells described as similar in scope to the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va., including full street mockups. Demonstrations were given in urban response training as well as hand-to-hand combat.

Knife attacks have increased recently in Israel, partly due to limited access to firearms. Wells said there were four knife attacks in one day during the trip. “If they had the proliferation of guns there like here [in the U.S.], I don’t know what it would be like,” said Wells.

Near the borders, the story is different, with attacks that involve explosives and firearms. Wells described visiting the Golan Heights and the Syrian border, being hundreds of yards from the warring factions involved in the high-profile conflict there. The group also visited the border of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

One of the only times the visiting group was not escorted by Israeli security forces was during an excursion into Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity, the supposed birthplace of Jesus Christ. The group was escorted from the Israel-Palestine border by 15 Palestinian police officers. Israeli security was not allowed to accompany, but according to Wells, the two police forces have a good “day-today” relationship.

The excursion “was on, then it was off, then it was on,” according to Wells. “There was a lot of uncertainty.” After the group visited the church, they had a chance to sit down with the Palestinian officers, who prepared lunch for the Americans and shared stories. “No matter where you go, cops will be cops,” said Wells.

Wells said that the combination of training and visiting holy sites drove home why there is so much tension in the region and why people feel so strongly. He noted how much of a focus there was on getting things back to normal after an attack had occurred, as well as talked about the range of approaches tailored to each situation, with measures taken at the airport being covert and unseen, while in Jerusalem and at the borders security forces make themselves extremely visible.

When asked about the possibility of over-militarization in the U.S., Wells said that local police can learn a lot about community policing from the Israelis, who he said are able to maintain strong relationships with the community despite the persistently high threat level. Wells said that in the U.S. the threat of terrorism is largely linked to what the Israelis termed the “internet intifada,” using a term associated with Palestinian uprising against Israeli forces in the past. He said it is hard to get the extremists into America, and so they rely on radicalizing those already here.

Using intelligence, “maintaining a mindset as far as preparedness, and responding as you’re trained” are what local forces focus on, Wells said, adding that although local training resources pale in comparison to the 57-acre, \$800 million training facility he visited, there is a lot of training events and a lot of education for local law enforcement.

Wells said he found the trip worthwhile and impactful. “Every aspect of it, tactically, legally, religiously, socially, it was very life-changing,” he said. “I will go back one day. I loved it that much.”



Israeli police demonstrate disarming techniques to Police Chief Richard Wells, third from right,

and his visiting group. (Photo by Yoni Reif)



Palestinian Police Lt. Col. Ziyad Al-Khatib addresses Canton Police Deputy Chief Helena Rafferty. (Photo by Richard Wells)



Wells' group approaches the wall separating Israel and Palestine. (Photo by Yoni Reif)