



THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

On a trip to Gaza, **Paula Slier** proved yet again that language doesn't have to be a barrier to communicating in a foreign country

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for *Russia Today*, Jo'burg-born Paula Slier has had her fair share of hair-raising adventures. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track.

TWITTER:
@PaulaSlier_RT

THE RUSSIAN ambassador extended his hand.

"Happy to meet you," he said in Russian.

I smiled and answered in English: "I apologise sir, but I don't speak Russian."

Perplexed, he peered over the top of his thick-rimmed glasses. "You are the Middle East Bureau Chief for *Russia Today*, are you not?" he asked in English.

I nodded.

"And you don't speak Russian?" he asked, obviously completely bewildered.

I nodded again, thinking it best not to profess to the eight words of Russian I knew quite well, thanks to the various Russian cameramen I'd worked with over the years. None of these words should be uttered in polite company.

For the umpteenth time I promised myself I was going to learn Russian. And Arabic. Travelling the Muslim world speaking only South African English and a smattering of Afrikaans is not easy.

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I was in Gaza and, to be frank, I wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for work. Not that Gaza is without its attractions: there is a church built by the Crusaders in the 12th century and a stone building dating back to the Mamluk period, where Napoleon spent a few nights in 1799. But my crew and I were in town for a week to produce a series of stories about the humanitarian situation.

My producer, an English woman with a strong Southampton accent, was moonlighting as a call centre operator for a British supermarket chain in the evenings and it never ceased to amaze me how, with the sometimes deafening muezzin's call to prayer in the background, she'd answer her cellphone with: "Yes madam, what exactly is the problem you are experiencing with your order of five tins of tomato soup?" and no-one ever asked where in the world

she was! It just goes to show how used to international call centres we've become.

One of my first points of call in the city was a South African woman who was married to a Gazan she'd met in Johannesburg. She'd been living in the enclave for two years and I received her details from the South African embassy with whom she was in regular contact. She was slowly driving them mad with her efforts to bring her domestic worker over. Her mother-in-law, an elderly woman who'd never set foot out of Gaza, wrapped her arms around me when I was introduced as another South African.

"My son," she wailed as she bear hugged me, "spent three years in your country. When he came back home and rang the doorbell, I screamed and cried and hugged him so hard I wouldn't let him go. I couldn't believe he had survived South Africa – the warzone!"

Well, um, err...

Gaza is one of those places where being a foreign, female reporter helps. For a long time my male colleagues had been hankering (unsuccessfully) for the opportunity to enter a Hamas smuggling tunnel. After fate smiled on my gender, I was lowered into one of several dozen that criss-crosses the area several metres below the ground. I crawled in after the diggers, feeling slightly claustrophobic as the tunnel became narrower and darker. Eventually I couldn't see anything and, lying on my stomach, I pushed the microphone forward and shouted questions into the darkness. Muffled answers came back. It wasn't exactly the perfect interview, but it made for good video – until loud cries from up above caused all of us to jump (as much as one *can* jump with your stomach on the ground and your head scraping the roof). Israeli jets were bombing nearby and the Egyptian soldiers were warning the diggers to get the hell out of there. And we did. I'll never forget being lifted – dangling dangerously inside a bucket as it was hauled up at twice the speed the descent had taken – while some 30 faces with long beards peered down in bewilderment. At least my hair was covered with a scarf!

Like any good traveller, I didn't want to leave Gaza without some kind of memento, and Rami the cameraman suggested that we have our photo taken at a local camera shop. There was a range of backgrounds and props to choose from. My endearing memory of Gaza, which is framed on my writing desk at home, is of me and Rami, both resting an arm on opposite sides of a massive Qassam rocket, grinning into the lens. 🌈