

Notes on our trip to Palestine (November 2008)

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We have returned from a Study Tour to Palestine. Rather than stewing longer over what we might write and therefore procrastinating, we have decided to write down some of our impressions now, fresh and undigested as they are.



Graffiti on the Wall in Bethlehem. House demolition strikes at the heart of the community.

The Country is beautiful, the Palestinians are wonderfully welcoming, we had a permanent sense of being enveloped by history, and we felt safe throughout our visit.

We went expecting the political situation to be pretty bad, what we saw was worse. In a land that was historically populated by a multitude of populations, the Israeli government wants to establish a state which is Jewish. (The question: “who is a Jew” still has to be settled, as has what is meant by a Jewish state). The justifications for this are religious (“God gave the land to the Jews”), nationalistic and the need for security. There are voices within Israel asking for a state based on Jewish values rather than wanting an ethnically Jewish State, but they are a tiny minority.

Politics are determined by the desire to have a Jewish State in which Arabs have no material place. This policy is pursued brutally. A people who suffered so much as victims of the holocaust are now the persecutors, doing the same to Palestinians. It is difficult for Erika, a German, to say this. She feels guilty about the holocaust and would love nothing more than seeing a place where Israelis can live their lives safely. The early Zionist leaders spoke of: “A people without land returning to a land without people”. This was a dream, not a reality. In reality Palestine was populated by Arabs many of whom were highly educated, at the top of their professions and often wealthy (Palestinians filled the same roles in the Arab world as Jews in the West). Modern research indicates that genetically Palestinians are indistinguishable from the Jewish population of Israel.

Israel was established by UN resolution in 1947 in the aftermath of the holocaust and when the major Western countries did not want an influx of Jewish refugees. The UN envisaged separate states for Jews and Palestinians, but the Arab States and Palestinians did not accept the proposal. During the 1948 war Israel expanded its border beyond the UN proposal, expelled a large number of Palestinians and gave a form of citizenship to the rest (now referred to in Israel as “Arab Israelis”). These Palestinians, while heavily discriminated against, are relatively well off compared to those in the more recently occupied territories.

In 1967 Israel took control of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza (and Sinai, which has since been returned to Egypt). Their native populations are not offered Israeli citizenship. In gross breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel has annexed East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank, and has installed Jewish settlers on the best land and given them most of the water. With limited exceptions, Palestinians are not allowed into Israel proper and Israeli residents are not allowed into the Palestinian parts of the occupied territories (“for their own good and to avoid the Army having to rescue them”). In consequence there is minimal communication between the two populations.

In the name of security, the Israelis have built a wall to separate the Palestinians from Israel proper. But in practice this is not (as would be adequate for security purposes) on the border of the occupied territories, but well into the West Bank, so as to allow the new Settlements to be part of Israel. The wall is therefore a complex snaking affair, which encircles Palestinian villages and separates them from each other. To get from the Palestinian parts to the Settler parts/Israel, you have to go through military checkpoints. The settlements and Jerusalem are connected by a good infrastructure of roads which are for the use of Israelis only. Palestinians are confined to slower longer old roads with bad surfaces.

The wall has created Bantustans and the occupying forces are enforcing a form of apartheid, one described by Desmond Tutu as far more severe than apartheid in South Africa.

We do not want to write a lecture. Let us present impressions and experiences instead.

The Wall

It is an 8 meter high wall built of huge blocks. When the time comes for it to be dismantled, it will not be a joyful hacking away at stones as happened with the DDR wall. It is right inside Palestinian territory at the cost of uprooting trees and putting people into cages, prisons. One Palestinian house by the tomb of Rachael is enclosed on three sides, this being needed “for security”. The graffiti are amazing. It is creative, sarcastic and hits the mark. After the shock of seeing the wall for the first time, we got used to being by the wall and being observed from watchtowers by soldiers.

In one refugee camp we were invited to go up to the roof of a house from where we could look over the wall and see the olive groves on the other side. It is impossible for the farmers to get to their land. After they have not been on their land for 3 years, their land will be forfeit as it has not been cultivated! (The Palestinians are well aware of the Kafkaesque nature of Israeli rules.)



Stairs to roof in refugee camp in Bethlehem

The village of Belin, near Ramallah, stages a weekly non-violent protest by the alarmed barbed wired double fence (not a wall there) which separates them from their fields – and each week they get bombarded with rubber bullets, tear gas and rubber coated metal bullets. We saw the collection in large bins. When we went to the fence we were shouted at by the soldiers who quickly appeared on the other side: “don’t touch the fence”. The fence is their property! Touching it also leads to a quick reinforcement of their numbers.

We were told that provocateurs were planted into these peaceful demonstrations, this way giving justification to the military action.

The wall takes any empty space in built up areas and we feared an accident would happen when our coach drove on a very congested road without sidewalks. The kids were walking home from school on the road weaving in and out between cars. There was no other way for them. Often they seemed to be practically under our coach. We saw no playgrounds. Once we got past this town we drove through a Jewish Settlement with a shopping mall and wide streets. Also with replanted uprooted ancient olive trees in the middle of the roundabouts. Some of the trees were dead or dying.



Double fence at Belin

Court cases have been fought arguing that the Fourth Geneva Convention only allows the Wall to be built for security purposes and that its line is unlawful. Not only has this been upheld by the International Court, there are also five outstanding high court judgments within Israel requiring the wall to be moved. But no action has been taken. Essentially the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) is above the law.

Travel

To get from place to place you have to cross check points. There are permanent checkpoints and flying ones. We walked through one of the permanent ones in Bethlehem (close to the watch tower illustrated, on what used to be the main highway from Hebron via Bethlehem to Jerusalem but now stopped by the Wall). Workers start queuing at 3 a.m. to be able to get through early, when the barriers open at 5 a.m. The line is long and defined by metal fences, forcing all into a double file. The workers take off their belts and shoes, have their wallets in their hands and their work permits at the ready – like at Heathrow you say? Well, a longer wait, more claustrophobic, more uncertainty, no respect and deliberate humiliation. In addition to the permit they place their hand on a pad. If they are more sweaty or less sweaty than when their data was taken, they get sent back. They lose the day's work and possibly their job. They get sent back by a disembodied voice shouting at full volume. No face to face interaction. We were told that they were often insulted (“go back you donkey”). If they get through, they run to work or buses wait for them to pick them up. The same procedure on their way home. Often 2 hours wait each way. 4 hrs added to their workday. Outside rush hour the wait might only be 20 minutes each way. These checkpoints also make going to work particularly difficult for women who traditionally should not walk on the streets after dark. We, as internationals, queued by choice (normally we went through by bus with minimal delay) but we were not expected to comply with the rules although many of us set off the bleeps by wearing metal objects.



Watch tower in Bethlehem, on what used to be the main road to Jerusalem

Flying/temporary checkpoints add to the misery of movement. This is the example a student at Bethlehem University gave us: Her big day had arrived. She had an appointment to enroll at the University. She left early by bus from Hebron. The bus got stopped due to a temporary checkpoint. No movement. She finally got off, managed to walk to the checkpoint and talk her way past the soldiers. A taxi on the other side got her to her appointment. On returning to the check point 4 hours later, her bus still had not got through. It is worth noting that these miseries are not visited on Israelis. As mentioned above, most of the better roads in the Occupied Territories are for Israelis and Internationals only, and they can pass easily with minimal checks. Palestinians are confined to old roads with checkpoints. Again, this is done nominally in the name of security, but in practice it segregates Palestinians and controls them. It is a nice point whether this is the purpose of the checkpoints: the Israelis are masters of double meanings and deniability, and the stated reasons for many government actions are implausible.



The Wall in Bethlehem

Bethlehem University

As a result of travel uncertainties, most Bethlehem University students need to find (expensive) accommodation in Bethlehem. The University provides hostels for women outside the campus but not for men. Men have to find rooms with families, as men together in hostels would be too easy a target for raids and arbitrary incarceration. On the day we were at the University, one woman who was supposed to accompany us did not show up. We learned later that her youngest brother had been arrested and taken away at 3 a.m. from the home and the family was trying frantically to establish his whereabouts. It is normal not to be told for several days. He was the last of her three brothers to be arrested, the other two had been released without charge. Administrative Detention without charge is normal, and typically can last for 3 months even of kids of 14. 70% of the students at Bethlehem University are Muslim (although it is

nominally a Roman Catholic foundation) and 70% are women. The explanations offered for the gender balance are better academic performance by women, fewer arrests of women during school years and that more (middle class) Palestinian men get sent to university overseas (Israel actively encourages the Palestinian middle class to emigrate and many have relatives in the US who will pay for education).

The University was an oasis. A wonderful place. It felt sane and normal and the students were open and friendly, happy to chat. We were served a wonderful lunch in their formal dining room to give the catering students an opportunity to practice. It was a delight.



Bethlehem University

The refugee camps in contrast are depressing. They have a permanent feel, bare concrete, no decent sanitation, restricted water supplies (typically 2 hours per day), no vegetation and no play areas. Quite clean though. With so many inhabitants unemployed, we were disappointed not to see any local initiatives to make the place more habitable. There is now a clear expectation of having aid come in and of being dependent.

Discrimination in Water Supply

The discrimination on water supply is well institutionalised. Palestinians get water about 2 hours per day, Israelis get it consistently. Allegedly some of this distinction is because the Palestinians are building without planning consent, but they cannot get planning consent. Palestinians therefore have to have water tanks on their homes. Palestinians also pay about double what Israelis pay (no reason offered to us). Palestinians get far less water per person and per acre than Israelis, although under the Fourth Geneva Convention an Occupying Power is not supposed to expropriate water and may only expropriate land for security reasons. Israel, having originally accepted that it is an Occupying Power, has now produced a convoluted argument otherwise that even the USA does not accept (and it has anyway been rejected by the International Court).

Schooling

Nearly all schools in Israel are segregated by religion and state funding is very limited.

We visited a Muslim girl's school in East Jerusalem. The bright and bubbly girls were quite clear that they would never have a Jewish friend: "They are our enemies". They live across the road from Jewish kids but never meet and certainly not as playmates. This supported the fears of a 75 year old Palestinian woman who told us her life story. She had grown up in Jerusalem and had happily played with her Jewish neighbours. They were friends. She has now lost contact with them and is saddened to see that her grandchildren will never have that human contact. This simple school was founded two years ago by a rich Palestinian from Haifa. The kids often sit three to a bench for two, and have little in terms of learning materials. We were received with great ceremony and fed wonderful simple food. The founder was present and read out a talk which had been carefully drafted: we were their first ever international delegation. Very moving. The school needs support. We fear they might need support soon for rebuilding a little playground across the road. They were given this land by the owner, whose house had been demolished. They cleared the rubble and made a small basketball court. This means they developed the land illegally and it is now under a renewed demolition order. It might be demolished at any moment.



Snaking Wall

House Demolitions

"Demolition order". We heard the words a lot. On our first day we visited a couple whose house has been demolished four times. Four times it has been rebuilt with the help of ICAHD (Israeli Committee Against Housing Demolition). It is now a peace centre and hosts summer camps for rebuilding homes. The owner

has proof of ownership back to 1920. This was no help in fighting the case to save his house. The case has now gone as far as the Israeli Supreme Court and has been appealed to an international court. The international court has accepted the case and has asked for a copy of the Supreme Court judgment. For six months now no judgment has been provided!

We were received into the peace centre by the owner and his wife who had prepared a magnificent meal for us. Even though I (Erika) had read an account of their story, I was very upset, particularly by the effect these demolitions had on the children. They are all damaged in various ways and the beautiful wife just looks sad. She has mainly recovered from a nervous breakdown. The children know that their father cannot protect them and tell him so. This is soul destroying.



Demolished home in East Jerusalem

Demolition orders are given to houses that are in places that the occupying force or potential Jewish settlers want. In one neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, very near the Old City, houses are supposed to be cleared for archeological digs and to build a park. 88 houses have a demolition order on them. The inhabitants have nowhere else to go. The demolition there is under a piece of legislation relating to the National Interest, and there is no right of appeal and no compensation. Other demolitions are because of a lack of planning consent. Why do these Palestinians stay? They are in possession of highly valued passes as East Jerusalem residents, which give them opportunities to work in West Jerusalem. They can't just move elsewhere because they would lose their right to travel and, critically, these are their homes. We visited a home two days after the next door house had been demolished in the usual fashion: at about 9am, once the children and the men have left, all access roads get blocked off by soldiers. Bulldozers drive in and the women in their houses sit and wait: who will it be today? One house is targeted. The occupant gets 15 minutes to leave. Then the bulldozers break the house down. The occupants have to pay for the cost of the demolition. We took pictures with the toys and furniture buried and shoes lying about. A scene one is more used to see on TV after an earthquake. The children arrive from school to a home in rubble. Are you surprised they pick up rocks and throw them at soldiers?



Close up of the rubble

We were in the country for just 9 days, and we heard of about half a dozen demolitions happening during our visit. We visited another site on the day after it had been done: simple shacks inhabited by Bedouins in the Negev desert. Here they were bulldozed supposedly because the land was used as a firing range, though the Bedouin had been there for 70 years and had never experienced any firing. To make things worse, their tractor was confiscated as well, making it impossible now to take produce to market. It seems the land is wanted for the settlers from the nearby settlement.

At the end of our visit there, we met by chance Rafid Hussein, the chief of staff of Mahmoud Abbas (the President of the Palestinian Authority) who was visiting the Bedouin headman. Hussein and his large entourage (nearly all armed) were travelling in two new black SUVs and Hussein himself was dressed in a new and beautifully cut Armani suit and was as smooth (and said as little) as any experienced politician in the West. The general view of our interlocutors (Israeli and Palestinian) was that the Palestinians have been very poorly served by their representatives.

Not all houses which get demolished are bulldozed down. About half of them are "voluntarily" taken down by the occupants to avoid the fine which is levied on the occupants living in a house under the order and also to avoid having to pay for the cost of the forced demolition.

For clarity, it should be noted that Palestinians find it almost impossible to get permission to build at all anywhere; and if they do build, are likely to receive a demolition order. Jews, in contrast, find it easy to get



Bedouin home after demolition

permission (and with higher densities) and if they infringe, rarely (never?) is a whole house demolished. Also it is important to note that the Palestinian birthrate at 4.5 per woman (and at a young age) means families expand rapidly, an issue that terrifies the Israelis and adds to the housing pressure.

Settlements

We have mentioned Settlements a few times. These are the new developments placed usually on top of the hills, overlooking the Palestinians living below. They are simple, stark developments on confiscated land where the occupants have water and electricity, unlike the Palestinians. The settlers typically live there because it is cheap (strongly encouraged by the Government and subsidized by US donors). A minority of settlers is extremely violent and now even the government is worried that they are “out of control”. The military is unable and unwilling to keep them in check. Settlers hassle Palestinians who work their fields, they attack them, they insult them. One farmer told us how they several times uprooted his old olive trees over night and moved their fences onto his land. The farmer’s great grandfather had bought the land with his brother in 1916 and they have the documents. The family first lived in caves which they dug with their hands. These caves are still there and we sat in one of them for a while, quietly. This farm, “Tent of Nations” now has international volunteers working on the land. It runs summer camps and welcomes volunteers for olive picking.



Cut down olive trees

Tent of Nations farm is near Hebron, a city where there is quite a bit of unrest at the moment. We visited and experienced ourselves the arbitrary treatment meted out by the military. When we, accompanied by two Scottish women from the Peace Team, wanted to walk through the city, we were asked to stop at a temporary barrier. Our Scottish leader challenged the validity of this order as plenty of settlers were allowed through, and we walked on. The very young sergeant got angry and told us that this was “not a democracy but the military”. Soon the police was called and their van arrived, blocking us from moving forward. So we were between the police and the Israeli barrier. Just to be on the safe side, another 6 armed Israeli soldiers arrived running past us and making sure we could not turn back. When we talked to them in a friendly manner and asked them where we were supposed to go, they were just as stumped for an answer as we were. We managed to talk with them whilst the policeman and our Peace Team leader first shouted, then talked and in the end hugged each other. The police ordered us to return. The soldiers at the barrier were not happy to see us back and again didn’t want to let us through. Again the police had to come and sort it out. For us, an international group of respectable oldish tourists, it never felt dangerous, just arbitrary. It is quite different for the Palestinians who get harassed this way.



Settler rubbish in nets above the Hebron Souk

We continued into the Souk. Settlers have built homes immediately (2 metres) above the shops and throw their waste and rubbish down into the alleys. The Palestinians have therefore hung nets across the road to catch the rubbish being thrown down.

In Ramallah we visited the Quaker Meeting House and heard from a US citizen who teaches at Quaker school. He needs to get his visa renewed every three months and never knows if he will be allowed back in. We can’t quite remember how he has been evading this process recently. Refusal of entry to occupied territories is unlawful under the Fourth Geneva Convention except for security reasons.

Jaffa

In Jaffa we heard how in 1948 the relatively few Palestinians who had not been expelled were herded into one small area which was labeled by the Jews: ghetto. As had happened in Germany to highly educated and often rich Jews, it was done to highly educated and often wealthy Palestinians. When these

Palestinians went back to their own homes and asked the new occupants if they could have one of their own pillows or other possessions, sometimes they were refused.

Jaffa oranges no longer come from Jaffa. The brand name was sold to Spain. The orchards are destroyed. Part of the beach became a landfill for the rubble from the beautiful Palestinian houses which were pulled down to be replaced by ugly buildings. At this very moment this land-filled beach area is becoming desired land for returning Jews. It is now being landscaped at vast cost, with the top third being removed so the beach view from the houses is not spoilt. But there is no money for the local Palestinians for their school or for playgrounds.

On our day off we plus 5 others from the group went to Masada and Jericho. A great day out. Masada was a fortress at the end of the first century BC and in 40 BC Herod used it as a magnificent refuge. It stands on a huge rock rising 400meters above the Dead Sea. In AD 66 group of Zealots conquered it, When their position against the Romans became hopeless, rather than being made slaves, the men committed suicide after first killing their wives and children. A dramatic place and a dramatic story. The location is now held in high esteem by the Israeli army. Jericho is a gorgeous oasis where we bought fruit and ate it in the road. We then had a lovely coffee and sweet desert in a local cafe. The shopkeeper was wonderfully friendly; as were nearly all Palestinians we met.

During the whole of our trip we were welcomed with open arms. We felt safe throughout our trip. The Palestinians want the world to see how and where they live. They need the income from tourism. They are naturally hospitable and love visitors. There is the normal hassling in the souks but less than we experienced in Egypt and Morocco. The food is simple and good and we drank tap water during all of our time there. The countryside is beautiful and to see the Holy Sites and Old Jerusalem is very moving.

Relevant websites:

ATG Palestine <http://www.patg.org>

Badil www.badil.org

Bethlehem University www.bethlehem.edu

Bilin www.bilin-village.org

Btselem, an Israeli Human rights organisation www.btselem.org

Ecumenical companions www.quaker.org.uk/eappi

ICAHD www.icahtuk.org

Machsom Watch www.machsomwatch.org

News summaries selected by people opposing the occupation <http://www.kibush.co.il/>

Palestine Solidarity Campaign www.palestinecampaign.org

Rabbis for Human Rights www.rhr.israel.net

Rediscover Palestine...<http://rediscoveringpalestine.org.uk/PDF%20-%20Visit%20Palestine.PDF>

Sabeel www.sabeel.org

Tent of Nations www.tentofnations.org

The Jerusalem center for women www.j-c-w.org

UN Relief Agency <http://www.ochaopt.org/>

Zochrot <http://www.nakbainhebrew.org/index.php?lang=english>



Old Palestinian House in Jaffa