

Hello everybody,

Given that the news has swung away from settlement freeze to Iran's nuclear threat to Israel, I want to bring my friends' focus back to what is happening in Jerusalem.

Attention on Iran serves to minimise the 'local' Israeli occupation, which is after all why I am here. But I do very much regret Iran's misdemeanours coinciding with the UN debate on the Goldstone Report on war crimes in Gaza. It means opinion changes back once again to what might potentially be done to Israel rather than what Israel is doing to the Palestinians. (Also Yasmin Alibhai-Brown pointed out in the Guardian the other day, what price the IAEI inspecting Israel's undisclosed nuclear facility at Dimona when it has finished at Qom?) Obama's tiny window of opportunity for an even-handed consideration of the Israel/Palestinian conflict is closing as the West seems now back to Israel's view of itself as the tiny state besieged by the huge Arab world. When we went to the settlement of Efrat the other day (see below) the PR man started with a map showing how small Israel is and how the Muslim enemy stretches all along North Africa, down East Africa, over the Indian subcontinent, to the Far East etc. I pointed out that I was from an equally tiny country that had nonetheless bullied the world (including its neighbours) for three hundreds years or more. The size doesn't matter argument didn't impress him. And I wasn't impressed by his view either

Anyway, back to the Battle for Jerusalem. Many Jerusalemites think the battle is all over, that Israel



is too strong and they are too alone. But the spirit is still strong in the Hannoun and Ghawi camps under the olive tree. All the same, with autumn upon us and the children back at school, it is getting harder to sleep out on the street and international pressure does not look like making Israel return their houses. So, last week the Sheikh Jarrah families went to demonstrate in front of the UNWRA - the UN agency set up for Palestinian refugees in 1948. Two year-old Sarah Ghawi held a sign saying "We are human beings, not monkeys to live under a tree." UNWRA's responsibility stems from 1956 when it gave the families houses in return for renouncing the financial benefits of refugee status. That was generations ago. Now they are refugees again. Accepting

responsibility is, however, a big step. Any agreement will eventually include the other 25 houses targeted by settlers. The remaining families want UN flags put on their houses to show the UNWRA built them, and UN help with lawyers.



Evictions will come one by one. The court hearing for the next house is October 24. It belongs to Mohammed Sabbagh and his five brothers: there are 40 family members, 20 of them under 18. Mohammed has the tiniest of hopes that the outcome of his hearing will be different. This is because the evidence showing the settlers' documents are fake, that emerged during the Ghawi and Hannoun hearings but was not admitted because it came too late, will be presented again and hopefully admitted. Lawyers went to Turkey to look for the originals of the settlers' Ottoman Empire documents and found they did not exist. Mohammed is hoping against hope, but admits 'it will need a revolution in the Israeli

court to get a positive result.' I'll keep you posted just before I leave.

The other day there was an altercation in the street between the settlers now living in the former Ghawi house and one of the Ghawi men folk in the tent opposite. The police were called and Ghawi was banned from the area. On another day, following an incident in which two-year old Sarah Ghawi had shaken the settler gate, the settler lady had slapped her, the Ghawis had called the police and were promptly arrested along with Sarah. All spent four hours in custody You have to have the patience of Job to bear it here.



The rest of our work continues. The getting up at 4.30 am for Qalquilya checkpoint is getting me down. I am not a morning person. The checkpoint I prefer is Wadi Nar where we don't have to be until 8 am, a luxury. It is a vehicle-only checkpoint on the main Palestinian artery from Hebron to Ramallah, a long detour now that Palestinians

cannot cross Jerusalem. The road is narrow, steep and winding and there are often long tailbacks so we monitor movement for the UN. Unlike Qalquilya where the soldiers sit in reinforced steel boxes shouting through microphones, these soldiers stand outside checking passes. They usually come up and ask what we are doing. The other day I had an odd conversation with one. He asks what I think of the checkpoint (strange question). I say it's OK, but why is the road so awful, why doesn't Israel build a better one? "Why should we?" he says, "this is Palestine." I'm astonished. It's the first time I've heard a soldier say the P word. When I recover my cool, I think I'll take it further. "But the map we get at the airport shows Israel stretches from the Mediterranean to the Jordan Valley," I say. "No" he says, "This is Palestine." Just then a car pulls up with an Israeli number plate. The soldier stops it, says it can't pass. The driver has a Jerusalem ID and the passenger, his father who has a West Bank ID, is going to Hebron in the south of the Occupied Territory. The car turns back and the father hails



the next passing collective taxi. I ask the soldier. "If we're standing in Palestine, and the other side of the checkpoint is also Palestine, why can that car come to one side but can't pass to the other?" He looks nonplussed. I point to where the super settler-only road from Jerusalem to Jericho passes the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim. "What about that road?" I ask, "Is that Palestine?" "It's complicated," he says. "Not really," I say. "I think this is bad because the people driving on it have no rights. That is a good road because the people on it have rights." He looks like he's going to have a headache, and shrugs. I know it's

to do with zoning, but it does show the lunacy of occupation, this tiny patch of land crisscrossed with roads not facilitating but dividing. It's in the maps, and the naming of things.

This week the whole EAPPI group is spending a week in Israel to get more (different) information. Some of our teams who live in the OPT don't meet normal Israelis much. When I lived in Tulkarem, we only met soldiers and settlers. But here in Jerusalem we spend a lot of time with Israeli peace

activists and also have the same odd assortment of personal friends you'd have anywhere. I'm fortunate enough to have my best friend from school here (we met 54 years ago). She married an Israeli and is a law professor at Hebrew University. Luckily we agree on the basics like the need to end the occupation and settlements. But she is constantly pulling me up on how things look from the Israeli side, and it makes me check my facts and opinions.

The first day we visit the Israeli settlement of Efrat. It's part of the huge Etzion block several km inside the West Bank south of Bethlehem. The spokesperson, an American called Bob Lang, shows us the area. It's a most beautiful spot set on five hills and the quality of life is clearly excellent. The plan is to extend onto two more hills eventually. Bob speaks openly about the tactic of placing caravans on the hilltops to secure possession to await permanent construction later. He's a tiny bit worried about talk of settlement freeze but confident it will be got around somehow.

As we look at top notch nurseries, playgrounds, schools, libraries, community centres, Bob sets out his stall. He makes it clear he does not accept the West Bank is occupied territory; he refers to it by the Biblical names of Samaria and Judea. He believes all of what was Mandate Palestine from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River and the Golan Heights to Sinai is the Jewish homeland and theirs by right (viz the airport map). Thus, he confidently asserts the settlements are not illegal and the whole international community is wrong to claim that they are.

Bob believes in a one state solution, a Jewish state in which Palestinians can also live (if they accept it). But he is a bit vague as to what their rights will be, or how they will participate in it.. He reiterates the need for peace and concedes that Palestinian human rights are infringed by constant administrative detention, by the restrictions on movement, by the actions of some soldiers. But he justifies it by the duty of the state to protect its "own" citizens. Bob's presentation is slick, and probably sounds plausible to many of the groups he shows round. But we find it full of contradictions. Given that he does not admit the West Bank is under occupation, and given that Palestinians living there are not Israeli citizens but subject to Israeli military law, what in his view is the status of the Palestinian community who share this land with him: not citizens yet not occupied either!

Bob, quite bizarrely, insists 'settlements are a bridge to peace.' His framing of the conflict bears no relationship to what we see happening on the ground. When he talks of the need to build on the other two hills for 'natural growth', because settler children and grandchildren need homes, he seems not to connect it to the fact that Palestinians in nearby Bethlehem have lost 80% of their land to settlement construction. My mind wanders to the sisters I talked about in my last journal, Manal and Amani, squashed back into their in-laws' house beside the rubble of their small extensions.

When we go into the synagogue for a question and answer session, we raise various points but Bob has an answer for everything. He is clearly sincere as he trots out what are to us are old chestnuts. "If only the Israelis had a partner for peace, things could be sorted out." "If only the Palestinians would keep to previous agreements, then we could trust them." "If only they wouldn't engage in terrorism, we wouldn't have to repress them..." That was the only time Bob lost his rag. Someone had the nerve to suggest that since terrorism is killing civilians for political purposes, could it not be said that both sides are guilty?

In our afternoon session, I put Bob's "settlements are a bridge to peace" notion to a speaker from B'tselem, the respected Israeli human rights organisation that seeks to inform the Israeli public of the reality of the occupation. He looks at me as if EAPPI had started recruiting Martians.

The next day we head for Sderot, the town in southern Israel that bore the brunt of the Hamas' Qassam rocket attacks in the six months leading up to the Israeli assault on Gaza last January. The last team had had a presentation in the government media centre three months earlier. It had not been

altogether successful. Some of the EAs got a bit hot under the collar faced with the ‘they brought it on themselves’ argument from the American guide when Gaza was mentioned (she was only doing her job). In turn, the guide had not liked what she had interpreted as a lack of sensitivity to Israeli suffering in some of the EAs questions. So much so, that she had written an article in the liberal daily Ha’aretz complaining about the group’s callous attitude.



Not wanting to repeat a very expensive tour that had spectacularly failed to build bridges, the office contacted a group called Other Voice to show us round. Eric Yellin showed us a little of the modest town of Sderot before pointing out the myriad bomb shelters, the places that had been hit, the growing sophistication if not accuracy of the rockets. He said that although the rudimentary rockets had killed and injured few people in ten years, as a father of three young boys he could testify to the trauma of living with the constant anxiety of one of your kids being the next victim.

Then on the high ground overlooking Gaza (below) Eric talked about the death and suffering on the other side. The Strip was so near, the sun sparkled on the skyscrapers, urban sprawl still standing although you get the impression from TV that it is all rubble. It felt obscene watching, knowing of the prison

conditions still in force, the un-rebuilt houses, un-restocked hospitals, depleted schools, the sewage plant on the brink, the despair. Eric also felt despair at the fact that the only communication between his town and the Gazans was through bombs and rockets, whereas when he was younger people had had cordial relations, had even worked together. Even now his organisation had counterparts on the other side with whom they kept in touch by phone, email and video link, trying to maintain a contact for better days that now seemed so far off.



Eric also regretted being ‘shielded to death’ by the millions of dollars pouring into Sderot from abroad solely for defensive infrastructure, when his town had so many other needs. And he also felt uncomfortable about his town being used as the vanguard of his government’s war on terror rhetoric since despite their own very real fears there was a wide range of opinion there about the wisdom of such a massive attack on the captive population in Gaza. Eric was remarkable. He humanised everything, everyone’s pain became important, Eric’s family, all the Sderot families. He managed something I had previously found difficult faced with the seemingly smug Australian-Israeli spokesman Mark Regev on TV as I mourned the people in Gaza.

I thought a lot about Eric and common humanity; even more so when a rather weird episode on the hillock overlooking Gaza took on added significance. As our bus arrived, we could see a tent set out with drinks and nibbles. In front of it, very large entwined British and Israelis flags flapped in the wind. When we stopped nearby, some soldiers rushed up and told us to move on. We drove on a bit further, got out, and started taking photos of Gaza and the countryside around Sderot. Soldiers zoomed up again and again told us to clear off because this was a military zone, etc. As we drove off, some British big cheese arrived in a convoy of cars bearing more entwined flags. I didn’t think much more of it until I got an email forwarding an article from Ha’aretz about the secret visit of British

Chief of Staff Sir David Richard to Israeli units that are using advanced military equipment and also to exchange military intelligence with Israeli top brass. It somehow felt even more obscene to have shared that hill with Sir David knowing he was inspecting the Gaza laboratory.

The next day, our group heads north to Haifa. On the way we pass the largest settlement in the OPT, the Modi'in Illit block, a sort of dormitory town for Tel Aviv, 40 minutes away. It's vast. It doesn't look middle class like Efrat. In fact, more like Pete Seeger's song about 'living in boxes, all made out of ticky-tacky, that all look just the same'. The point about Modi'in Illit is that part of it, called Matityahu East, was illegal even under Israeli law and should have been demolished but... instead of the bulldozers, building permission was granted retroactively under dodgy circumstances. It is built entirely on land from the nearby Palestinian village of Bili'in that was previously being cultivated. The villagers, with Israeli and international activists, hold a weekly protest that has been met with extreme violence.

Continuing up Israel's main artery, we pass my old stamping ground of Tulkarem. It is right beside the road but hidden behind the Wall. Except you don't see the Wall. In my last journals four years ago I wrote about being fascinated by the idea of landscape gardeners being contracted to think up creative ways of helping the Israeli population shut out all thought of the Occupation. I talked of how I came through the checkpoint into Israel to see the earth piled up in front of the Wall being planted with grass and bushes to make it look like a small hill. Now some of these bushes are fully grown trees and the Wall is completely hidden. Who cares that on the other side is a 9 metre drop, a buffer zone of rubble and razor wire, followed by a derelict zone of closed garages where Israelis used to get their cars fixed before the Wall shut the mechanics in and their clients out.

And so to Haifa. It's a great place. So is Acre on the other side of the bay where we even have time for a quick tourist visit and a swim. Like Jaffa, they still retain some of that feeling other Mediterranean ports have, with fantastic histories of mixed populations even now they are part of the Jewish state. As a backdrop to the port, the extraordinary gardens of the B'hai religion add to this pot pourri. And so does the Stella Maris guest house on the top of the cliff, which is run by Italian nuns, full of icons and religious paintings.

We have a morning session with Ruth Hiller from New Profile, an Israeli ngo that works to promote the demilitarization of Israeli society. She shares her concern about the glorification of the military in education, cultural activities, advertisements and public spaces. She describes Israel as "an army with a state, not a state with an army," and criticises "the culture of fear promoted by the government, and propagated by the media, which feeds on suspicion, mistrust, misunderstanding, nationalism and victimhood."

New Profile is one of the organisations currently most harassed (along with the ex-soldiers group Breaking the Silence and Rabbis for Human Rights.) Earlier this year they had their offices broken into and their hard drives stolen. They are being taken to the High Court for incitement by an organisation called Forum for Equal Sharing of the Burden. But Ruth says they don't incite, merely provide services to refusers, reservists who don't want to return to duty, and soldiers who want to leave. The harassment reflects the political shift to the right, she says. They have always come in for criticism but Israel has always been an open and free society for Jews and she has never before felt there would be attempts to silence them in this way.

It was good talking to Ruth because she cleared up some of the misconceptions I had. Soldiers at checkpoints tell you they have no choice but serve in the IDF. But Ruth says 25% of high school graduates are classified 'medically unsuitable' to serve, and still keep their benefits. Avoiding service is apparently not too hard, it's only if you refuse to serve on moral grounds that you are punished. Also 30% of soldiers drop out during their first year of military service. When asked whether the settlers could be referred to as the paramilitary wing of the IDF, she said 'absolutely.'

We continued onto Nazareth in the Galilee, another spectacularly beautiful region where the majority of Israel's 1.5 million Arabs live. Muhammed Seydan from the Arab Association for Human Rights, who gives us a presentation, doesn't like the term Israeli Arab and calls himself a Palestinian Arab living in Israel. It's obviously an important distinction for him since identity is so enshrined in language here. Either way they're the descendents of the Palestinians who were not expelled/fled during the 1948 war. They have Israeli passports, the right to vote and representation in the Knesset. All the Jewish Israelis I know say that gives them equal status, so I was interested to hear Muhammed's take on it.

He says between 1949 and 1967 there was clear apartheid, with Jews living under a civil system and Arabs under military law. When the military regime was abolished, discrimination continued on four levels. Briefly, he identified them as: direct legal – such as restriction on who Arabs can marry; indirect legal - like the consequences of being exempt from military service because many benefits (mortgages, jobs) are tied to being an ex-combatant; institutional – the uneven distribution of resources and services in the two communities (you can see this quite clearly right there in Nazareth, as you can in Jerusalem); and then the good old culture of racism present in our own societies in which the majority treats the minority as inferiors –except the majority is usually indigenous and the minority immigrants, and in Israel it's the other way round.

Coincidentally, Jonathan Cook, author of a book I'm reading called 'Disappearing Palestine', lives in Nazareth. And also coincidentally, the page I've just read takes me back to my almost-encounter with Sir David Richard (or Sir Jock Stirrup as was later corrected in the press) overlooking Gaza. He writes:

“Over many decades Israel has developed and refined policies to disperse, imprison and impoverish the Palestinian people in a relentless effort to destroy them as a nation. It has industrialised Palestinian despair through ever more sophisticated systems of curfews, checkpoints, walls, permits and land grabs. It has transformed the West Bank and Gaza into laboratories for testing the infrastructure of confinement, creating a lucrative “defence” industry by pioneering technologies needed for crowd control, surveillance, collective punishment and urban warfare.”

Chilling to wonder if Sir David (or Sir Jock) was asking how the drones had performed.

The 'Ruths' and 'Eric's' in Israel are probably horrified at this vision, and the "Bobs" of the settler communities would claim it wasn't true, that their system was benign. If only the 'bridge to peace' lay in their hands and not in his.



As I always say, I do have some fun too. On my way up to the north of the West Bank where I'm going to visit our other teams, I stumble on an Oktoberfest in the Christian town of Taybeh (Biblical town of Ephraim, see left) about forty minutes east of Ramallah. Yes, seriously, a beer festival. Taybeh has the only independent brewery in the Middle East, and produces the excellent beer of the same name. The Khoury family started production there in the Nineties and did really well until the Intifada got in the way and sales plummeted. Luckily, as I learned on a visit round the plant, things have picked up again. Now I can say I've been round two breweries; Guinness in Dublin, and

Taybeh in Taybeh. Actually, it was good fun all round, lots of good stuff to eat, beautiful embroidery to buy, local groups dancing Dabke, a really odd thing - a rugby match (remnant of British colonial

schools?) and funnier still, the German cultural attaché and his three little boys decked out in lederhosen. Sometimes you really don't know where you are here. Taybeh overlooks the Jordan Valley and the shadows on the desert at sunset were breathtaking.

Back to reality. The news that this week appalled the Palestinian street well used to appalling stuff is the Palestinian Authority is dropping its endorsement of the Goldstone report. To add insult to injury, the PA is launching an investigation into who actually made the decision, because apparently now no one is taking responsibility for it. OK, the Americans put the screws on, there were rumours of 'blackmail' tapes, and it was the price Israel was asking for approving airwaves for the new mobile phone network in the West Bank. Could it be that the Goldstone report was shafted to save a commercial deal? Human Rights vs Cheap Mobile Phone Calls?

So now I'm in Yanoun, a tiny village in the north east of the West Bank, which faces constant violence from the fundamentalist settlers of Itamar. The olive harvest starts tomorrow. The army is supposed to protect them for three days while they pick their olives nearest the settlement. They also need help from internationals or Israeli activists to get the crop in before their permit expires. Compared to the views of Itamar settlers, Bob is a saint.

More in my next journal about olive picking and my subsequent visit Tulkarem and the farmers who haven't been out of my thoughts for three years.

I'm afraid my invitation to visit me is running out, I'll be leaving in three weeks. You'll have to be quick.

Best wishes to all. Ann

As the Quakers say "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way."

I failed rather with photos this time.
Didn't seem to get the right ones and lost quite a few.
This to the left doesn't mean much, I just like it



Disclaimer

I have been sent by Quaker Peace and Social Witness to participate in the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The views contained here personal and do not necessarily reflect that of QPSW or the WCC. If you wish to public the information contained her or disseminate it further, please first contact the EAPPI national coordinator. teresap@quaker.org.uk