

Israel's military occupation of the Palestine: 'I'm an Irishman in the West Bank helping Kids get to School through Checkpoints'

Alex Dunne has been in the West Bank for over 40 days now, collecting stories of stories of military incursions, night raids, and settler attacks.

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"WHAT ARE YOU doing? Why are you here?" The soldier asks. "I'm keeping an eye on the children getting to and from school" I replied. The soldier blinks in disbelief. "Do children not go to school in Ireland?". "Of course they do" I replied, "But not in the presence of an army. Not in the presence of tear-gas, rifles and jeeps".

"Ah". A smile crept across his face as he looked down, shaking his head. "So you're watching me".

I've been in the West Bank for nearly 40 days, travelling from Ireland as an ecumenical accompanier (human rights monitor) with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). In this piece of land, smaller than Galway, the abnormal has become normal, the wrong has become right, and the profound beauty of the land has been muted by sirens, demolitions, stabbings and shootings.

My days are filled with travel and sweet tea. I accompany children to school, and collect stories of military incursions, night raids, and settler attacks - filling report after report, which are shared with UN bodies, and others needing such testimonies.



Soldier stands at the entrance to As-Sawiya School.

Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian West Bank is more than 40 years old and continues to hurt both Palestinians and Israelis to this day. EAPPI believes it is the keystone to the long-term resolution of conflict in the region.

The Oslo Accords of the early 1990's, an interim agreement for the establishment of a Palestinian state, are now 23 years old and 17 years overdue, and are seen by many Palestinians as the second occupation. With the Accords' establishment of Areas A, B and C, the hope of achieving a functioning contiguous Palestinian state has never seemed further from reality.



Israeli soldiers establish checkpoint for the children collecting exam results, As-Sawiya School, West Bank.

Since 1993, the number of Israelis living in settlements in the West Bank, has more than tripled from just over 200,000 at the beginning of the 1990's to over 650,000 today. Settlements are Israeli-only towns and villages and are illegal under international law. Land continues to be seized for the expansion of these settlements and the more fundamentalist, ideological settlers have raised their profile within society, assuming top positions of power in Israel's government.

EAPPI is committed to supporting all those working nonviolently for peace and one of the difficult things to witness is the distress many Israeli peace organisations and activists are feeling under the policies of their government. These Israelis know that their country's future relies on a lasting peace and a just end to the occupation.

The more these organisations work for peace from within Israel, the more that their government tries to stymie their efforts. This can be seen in the Bill currently before the Israeli Knesset (parliament) that seeks to curtail the access and viability of international and national NGOs operating within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian territory.



Palestinians I meet in the West Bank, all insist that their problem is not with Israelis, or even the state of Israel. Their issue is with being under a military occupation: restrictions to movement through a series of checkpoints (solely within the occupied West Bank, not within Israel); a separation barrier that is not built on the internationally agreed Armistice Line but one that snakes into and annexes private Palestinian land; and almost daily harassment and humiliation.

Take for example, the use of collective punishment procedures that see the family homes of Palestinian attackers being demolished and the family sent the bill.



Mosque, Huwwara Village, West Bank.

It's no wonder that many young people here ask me: "For a Palestinian in the West Bank, what's the difference between being dead and being alive?"

In stark contrast, many of the young people I speak with in West Jerusalem or Tel Aviv shy away from the subject of the occupation – slipping through the conversational trap door of: "I'm not interested in politics" or "You'd understand if you lived here".

Maybe now, in our centenary year, whilst we're spending time with our own history in a way we haven't done before, we may meaningfully seek an end to the occupation in the West Bank.

It's now 13 months since both houses of the Oireachtas called upon the government in an unopposed private members bill to recognise the State of Palestine along the UN's 1967 borders. Recognition is not a radical step. We'll be joining a club that has over 130 members, some of which are close neighbours.

Perhaps now, more than ever, is the time to act on recognition, supporting the campaign of SADAQA in Ireland, pursuing an end to the occupation and a just peace for all.

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