

From the West Bank

I recently spent two weeks in Palestine with the International Solidarity Movement. This is a report about my experience.

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Update:

On 9th November, at 4.30, the al-Kurd family were evicted by Israeli police. Seven Internationals were arrested. Full story.

Further update:

On 22nd November, Mohammed (Abu Kamel) al-Kurd suffered a fatal heart attack. Now, Um Kamel (his wife, Fawzieh) must fight alone. She is supported by ISM and other volunteers and is camping in a tent close by her rightful home. Despite further attempts by the Israeli army to discourage her, this time through fines and destruction of her canvas shelter, she and her fellow protesters are persevering.

Day one

Well, that was easy. I'd heard all sorts of horror stories about people being interrogated by the police on the way through Ben Gurion airport, questioned about their purpose for visiting, etc. In the event, the nearest I got was being stopped going through the green customs channel by a plain-clothes policeman, who showed me his badge, asked 'do you speak Hebrew, where did you fly from, how long did you spend in Istanbul — only a transit? — OK, enjoy your time in Israel'.

I only realised I was in when I went through a door and found myself on the street.

After that it didn't go quite so well. After being dropped off in Jerusalem, or al-Quds as it is known in Arabic, I found that the accomodation I thought I'd booked knew nothing of it. So I headed for the Palm Hostel, which was next choice. All I knew is that it was near the Damascus Gate. So I spent several hours walking through the maze of backstreets of the Old City, getting hopelessly lost, in an increasing state of panic, until by chance I came across someone who had heard of the hostel. Still had some trouble finding my way out, but eventually landed at the Palm.

Day two

Today I caught up on sleep (after having been up for over 36 hours), got lost in the Old City again, and met the contact for ISM, and will begin tomorrow.

Day three

The camp

After a short trip to Ramallah I'm now back in East Jerusalem, camping in the back yard of the house of a Palestinian family. However this is no holiday. There are four of us here, guarding the house against Israeli settlers. They have taken over a large part of the neighbourhood, including even part of this house. These are not economic settlers, tempted by cheap housing and large government grants, but hard-core ideological settlers, driven by the desire for Eretz Yisrael. At some point we expect the army to arrive to evict the Palestinians, in which case we intend to chain ourselves to the door and call for help from Gush Shalom, Rabbis for Human Rights, Anarchists Against the Wall, and, of course, the media.

The door on the right is the Palestinian household. The one on the left is the settlers' door.

The neighbourhood.

Day four

The resistance.

A house occupied by settlers

One of the team taking a well-earned rest

Today, being Shabat, was very quiet. The settlers were away until early evening, and the only activity was us, the al Kurd family, and the security guard who comes by every 40 minutes or so.

I've been finding out more about the situation. More info here:

Palestine News Network

http://www.kibush.co.il/show_file.asp?num=29052

The Guardian

The Guardian story is, of course, slightly inaccurate. Apart from anything else, the extension was built perfectly legally before 1967, but was then declared illegal by the Israelis when they occupied East Jerusalem. I've not fully grasped the legal intricacies that make it perfectly legal for the settlers to live there, but not the Palestinians.

Day five

After the peace of Shabat, it didn't take long for trouble to start. Just after 10.30 this morning one of the neighbours came running to us, seemingly in some distress. She was shouting 'bring a camera' and 'child's playground'. I picked up the video camera, and four of us Internationals followed her to a nearby playground, where some sort of argument was going on. I began filming. There were a number of settlers, quite a few Palestinian women, and four settler security guards, at least two of whom were armed. I moved around filming several arguments, then began taking still photos.

Apparently one of the settler women had taken over the playground, and slapped one of the Palestinian children (about 4-5 years old) to make her get off the swing, so her own child could use it.

I couldn't help but see the struggle for land going on in front of me. But this is the whole purpose of what we are doing here. It is not just about Kamel al-Kurd's house, it is about the whole future of East Jerusalem itself. The Israelis want to make it theirs, and remove the Palestinian population who have been living here for centuries. For the Palestinians this is not acceptable. This one house is symbolic of this entire struggle. The owners, Mohammed and Kamel al-Kurd, were even offered millions of dollars for the house. But it is not for sale. al-Quds is not for sale. It is the capital of Palestine, and, with the courage and determination of people like Kamel, will remain so. I am honoured to have been able to help in some small way.

One of the settlers' Guards

The argument in the playground. The man in the orange T-shirt was one of the armed settlers' guards.

Day six

Today was a very quiet day. I've been told that without our presence, things would be very different. The Israelis would like to evict the al-Kurd family quietly, but cannot with us watching all the time.

Day seven

I took a day off today, and went to visit Suzana in our twinning town of Aizaria, near Jerusalem, but cut off on the other side of the Apartheid Wall.

Days eight and nine

These were set aside for some ISM training. We stayed in a hotel in Ramallah, and learned about the principles of non-violent direct action, and how to deal with various situations, such as being arrested, resisting arrest, dealing with the numerous weapons the IOF use, such as tear gas, sound grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets. The box of old weapons that was brought out, collected from demonstrations, was quite scary.

Afterwards, on Thursday evening, we all split up into groups to go to the places where ISM has a presence. Two of us decided to go to Hebron.

Day ten

We arrived in Hebron late last night, after travelling from Ramallah by 'service' (shared minibus/taxi). We encountered one flying checkpoint on the way, which was fairly easy in the end. I expect the soldiers were just bored. After a cursory check of our passports, we were allowed to pass. Less expected was a Palestinian Authority checkpoint between Bethlehem and Hebron. The soldier seemed quite concerned about us travelling at that time, but we reassured him that we had contacts and somewhere to stay in Hebron, and we were quickly on our way again. When we arrived we had some trouble getting through the checkpoint at Tel Rameida (a major settlement in the middle of the city), where the flat is, but eventually our contact came down and negotiated our passage.

This morning we were to join several other groups, including Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), Eccumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel and Palestine (EAPPI), and the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS) in accompanying Palestinian farmers picking their olives in the shadow of a major settlement.

On this occasion, the army were there to protect us, rather than intimidate us. Although if the settlers were to attack, they are not likely to be very helpful.

The weather was sunny and hot, and, if there were to be no violent incidents, it looked to be a very promising day.

Shortly after we began picking, the police arrived. After a short discussion with the farmers, they insisted that all the internationals gather round to be filmed. I guess I can now expect a grilling when I leave.

Interestingly, the CPT and EAPPI were made to leave.

With them gone, we were left with six from IWPS and the two of us from ISM. The policeman insisted that only seven internationals should remain. So my comrade Jim was made to leave. I was not even allowed to take the video camera from him. The policeman was really quite aggressive.

At this time, some settlers appeared near where the police were stationed.

However, this proved to be the only hairy moment of the day. Soon afterwards, the police left, the settlers disappeared out of site, and we carried on picking.

Later, most of those who had been made to leave came back. One more pointless exercise in authority by the police.

At about four o'clock it began to rain. But the harvest being nearly done, we were able to call it a day.

The three of us from ISM (Liza joined us later) went to the Old City to meet a family in their shop. It sells embroidery and handicrafts made by a women's group. We had earlier been invited to dinner at their house in a nearby village. So off we went to a typically delicious meal.

Then came the time to get back to the flat. We knew that the checkpoint at the entrance to Tel Rameida was out of the question, but fortunately we had Liza with us, who knew a back way in.

While looking for it in the dark, a Palestinian man suddenly shot out of his back door shouting 'do not come here, this is my land'. He obviously thought we may be settlers come to take his house. Of course the sight of Liza saying 'salaam alaikum, machsom [checkpoint], help' was enough for him to realise who we really were. I believe the ISM are quite famous around here. So he became most friendly, and showed us the way. So we climbed over a wall into the road where the flat is. So much for IDF security.

Tomorrow we are going to try some checkpoint watching, and on Sunday I may be in Nablus, or may be going to a demonstration at the Eretz crossing in Gaza. However, the situation can change very rapidly here, so what actually happens could be quite different.

Day eleven

We began the day with some checkpoint watching. We sat near to the checkpoint at the top of the road, and simply watched. Soon an army jeep drove past, stopped, and parked right next to us. That was all — no-one got out, they simply stayed there.

So we decided to see what would happen if we attempted to walk up to the settlement. As expected, the soldiers stopped us. Then the jeep came down, and the soldiers inside got out.

Liza managed, after some time, to negotiate going into the settlement with one of the soldiers. Normally, only settlers and family of the Palestinians living there (and then only with the correct permit) would be able to go. We stayed behind and tried to engage the remaining soldiers in a political discussion. You can imagine how we fared.

After this, we went up the hill a short way and sat down. A young Palestinian boy came up to us, shook our hands, and gave us thumbs up signs. The only English he could manage was ‘come’, while making drinking gestures. We followed him to his house where we were invited for tea.

Patched bullet holes in the water tank

We didn’t speak much Arabic, and the family didn’t speak much English, but we were still able to communicate. They knew what we were doing in Hebron, and showed us the damage done by settlers to their house. A broken window, bullet holes, damage to doors.

A window broken by settlers

These girls approached us and gave each of us one of the flowers

Some more of our friends

Later, as I was getting ready to go to Ramallah my phone rang. It was the co-ordinator saying that there had been an invasion in the nearby village of Husam and could we get there. The three of us left immediately and went out to get a taxi to the village. We didn't know where it was so we just found a taxi and asked the driver to take us to Husam. What was happening? Details were sketchy. I didn't know if the whole village had been closed off, or what. Apparently, if it had been, we would have to use local people to help us get in. Probably by climbing something, so my comrade Liza said.

I'd been given the name of a contact and his phone number so in the taxi on the way I called him. He asked to speak to the driver. The driver took us to a parking area somewhere outside the village and there we met the contact. We got into his car, and he took us to the village. On the way he told us what had happened.

At 2.30 that morning the army had arrived and taken over a house in the village: fifteen members of the family, from a 75 year old man in a wheelchair to a four year old child, had simply been thrown out onto the street. The reason given was that someone had been throwing stones onto a settler-only road that ran next to the village.

We arrived to find the house surrounded by army vehicles and soldiers. The road in front had been closed off. There were a number of people already there from Tay'oush, an Israeli peace organisation, although they left shortly after we arrived.

We were taken to a house close by where the family were staying, where we were greeted enthusiastically and offered the usual tea and coffee.

Then we went out into the road and took our station next to the roadblock, armed only with our cameras.

What we were faced when we arrived at the village

The house the army had taken over

The place we were was right in front of one of the village mosques. After evening prayers, many of the locals gathered with us. You could feel the tension rising. At one point, an elderly man approached me to say that if he could not go home past the soldiers, he would have to take a detour of a kilometre and a half. So he began to walk past the roadblock, with a glance towards me to see that I was there, with my video camera trained on him. One of the soldiers shouted at him, walked up to him, then saw me with the camera pointing right at him. He fell silent and waved the man on. A minor victory, but it felt good.

Another ISMer joined us, a Jewish girl from the US. From then on it was something of a waiting game. We sat. They stood. Every now and then a group of soldiers would leave and march off down the street. We followed, me with the camera.

Obviously they didn't like this. Every now and then some would turn around and shout what I would guess was some kind of insult, maybe wave their guns around a bit, but there was not much they could really do. At one point we lost them as they disappeared into a dark grove. We thought they might have gone into a house, so we went round to the front where several of the locals pointed inside. We entered, hands clearly visible, shouting 'internationals'. The owner of the house appeared, and gestured for us to follow him upstairs. It turned out that he wanted us to look from his balcony. Most of his family were there, and greeted us enthusiastically. There was no sign of the soldiers, so we went back downstairs, after having to decline the offer of tea and coffee. Not what you should normally do, but the family understood that we were busy.

We returned to the roadblock to find that the soldiers had also come back.

This happened several times. Each time we followed. The locals always greeted us warmly, with comments such as 'welcome to our village'; one man was in his shop with the door half closed. When he saw us he leaned forward to wave. All the kids would wave at us and shout 'hello'. I've never felt so popular. Except with the soldiers. At one point they stopped and doubled back, walking right past us. One of them spat at my feet. Definitely one of my prouder moments.

We were joined in our watch by many of the local shebab — the youth. It was quite a party atmosphere for a time, sharing coffee, food, nargilas (the water pipes used for smoking), jokes and songs. My contribution was this, to the tune of the 'Dad's Army' theme:

Who do you think you are kidding Mrs Livni

When you think old Palestine's done

This was too much for the soldiers, though. They suddenly appeared mob-handed and told us to move 15m down the

road. We tried to protest, but the shebab suggested we should do so. I wondered if it was so they could tear gas us, but this didn't happen.

At about midnight the two girls went to get three hours sleep, to take over watch at 3am. Little more happened, except for two soldiers who came up to us and began chatting about who we were, what we did for a living, etc. It was quite surreal having such a friendly talk with them. The remaining shebab chatted as well.

When the girls returned, it was our turn to grab a few hours sleep. We awoke to find the soldiers had removed the roadblock. Then they put it back.

Two members of Machsom (checkpoint) Watch arrived. They took pictures, talked with the army and the family, and left.

Then the unexpected happened. A settler drove up, stopped, talked to some of the locals, then the soldiers, picked up one of the shebab, and drove off. It turned out he was friendly with the villagers, and had complained to the soldiers about what they were doing, saying that no stones had been thrown at the settler road. The politics of this region are so mixed up, even the 'enemy' are often friends.

Three of us left — two were leaving to go home, and I was to pick up some things from the flat in Hebron and return. But, typically, it didn't end up that way. We arrived in Hebron to find the situation with the settlers had deteriorated, and so I had to stay there on standby.

Day twelve

Fortunately, the feared violence didn't happen. The day before, the army had evacuated an outpost near the Kiryat Arba settlement, and many of the settlers had vowed revenge against the army, Palestinians and Internationals. We were still on standby, however, as the situation remains very tense. The flat is near the Tel Rumeida settlement, one of the hardline religious settlements, and there is a lot of activity. I tried to go through the checkpoint into H1, the area controlled by the PA, but could not even go down the road. Not only were the army present, but there were many armed settlers as well.

Jim and Liza have now left, and I have been joined by a group of Danish students doing a project on ISM. I met them after I had walked the long way round into H1, and after a short tour of the Old City and Souk, where they interviewed Marwal, who runs a shop selling handicrafts made by a women's collective, we attempted to re-enter H2 via the checkpoint. I knew it would not be possible, but wanted to show them what it was like.

Of course we didn't get through. The soldiers claimed that the area was a closed military zone, something they often say, whether it is or not, and when asked for the documentation, said that they did not have it — the police did. This time they called the police so that I could see it. Slightly worrying, as the police might have decided to arrest us (there was no cause, but they might have just held us for a time). So I started calling around my contacts, so that they knew what was happening. Anyway, the police arrived, shouted at us a bit, and held up a piece of paper from a distance, and swiftly put it away when I began to approach.

So we left, got into taxis, and went in by the back way. A journey of two or three miles in order to travel a couple of hundred yards.

When in the flat, the students interviewed me about my work with ISM. In the middle, they witnessed first-hand what it was like — I received a phone call from one of the local co-ordinators asking for three Internationals to spend the night in a local farmer's house, as protection against settlers. It seems the family were being targeted.

Unfortunately, there weren't three of us available. Later in the day I was joined by Jo, a Danish girl who had been with ISM for some time. The two of us were taken to the farm where we were to stay the night. It was next to the outpost which had been evacuated, thus explaining the family's concerns. We were given phone numbers for the army and police in case the settlers attacked — they would be much more likely to do something if Internationals called them, rather than Palestinians. Which tells its own story.

Once again, it turned out to be a quiet night. We sat outside until about one o'clock, when the farmer decided we could retire indoors.

The final two days

I returned to Jerusalem and stayed for the last night in the Palm Hostel. The next morning I headed for Tel Aviv airport.

Leaving was not as straightforward as entering. I was pulled aside by security and questioned about where I'd been, who I'd met and so on. Apparently it was the small size of my luggage that aroused suspicion. But after being grilled, roasted, frisked, scanned and sniffed, I was then fast tracked through the rest of the departure procedure. Even so I felt that I'd got away safely only when the plane was airborne.

Did I achieve anything while I was here? Yes, I think so. Generally, it was quiet. I could feel a lot of tension, but didn't see any serious violence. But I really do believe that it was our presence, as Internationals, that helped to diffuse many situations. Certainly the night in Husam, when the army took over a house, could have gone very differently had we not been there to watch their every move. And everywhere, but most especially in Hebron, you could feel the tension, as if there was always something about to happen.

Of course it's not always quiet. Since I returned just a few days ago, I've been reading reports from the ISM about settler attacks in the very places I'd been. Nevertheless, the presence of Internationals still gets the word out, and curbs the worst of the violence.

According to Israeli military law, it is permissible to use live ammunition against protestors, unless there are Israelis or Internationals present. Such a ruling speaks for itself about the racist nature of the Israeli state. And I do mean the state. Many of the peace activists I met were Israelis, and don't forget the settler in the village of Husam who was a friend of the villagers. Many more Israeli are fed lies and disinformation about what is actually happening in the occupied territories. In fact, Israeli citizens are forbidden by law from entering the occupied territories. It is the nature of the state that is the problem.

I now look forward to returning as soon as I can.

International Solidarity Movement

The views expressed in this report are my own personal views, and not necessarily those of Haringey Justice for Palestinians or the International Solidarity Movement.