

A Day in Birzeit

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Mazin Qumsiyeh, *Notes from Occupied Palestine*, 26 February 2005

Many in the US media again claim that the killings in Tel Aviv shattered a period of peace and quiet. Yet, in the past month of so called cease-fire and period of peace, Israeli occupation forces have killed over 25 Palestinians, continued choking off the life of Palestinians by checkpoints and walls, and have continued unrelenting colony building on Palestinian land. The hypocrisy of counting violence only when it effects Israelis is a crime against truth just as killing is a crime against human beings (regardless of their religion). But all of these are symptoms of the underlying disease of apartheid and colonization which is unrelenting in its intensity on the ground. Here is more on that from the ground.

A Day in Birzeit, Al Bireh and Ramallah

The drive to Bir Zeit in the morning was marred by news of two Palestinians murdered (for supposedly being too close to a forbidden area) and for us an Israeli soldier who just did not like the face of our taxi driver. When it was finally our turn to approach, the soldier ordered the driver to take us back to the end of the line of waiting cars. This added another 40 minutes to our trip. We were late for our meeting which was basically abbreviated to 15 minutes because of the class I was scheduled to run to.

Bir Zeit University is a very modern and progressive university which requires students to get some credit by volunteer community work. The campus of glistening white buildings is located among the great pastural hills so characteristic of this part of the country (lots of blossoming almond trees here). The class I spoke to was a political science class taught by Prof. Hisham Fararjeh. He is a real scholar, published many research papers and books (ranging from Political Biography of Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod to political development of Hamas). He stated that he was my student in Biology when I taught at Dheisheh Refugee Camp in 1978-1979. He received all his higher education in the US (BS, MS, PhD) and then decided to return to Palestine even though he could stay in the US. IMHO, his inability to see through his physical eyes made him far more sensitive and far-seeing with his great mind and spirit.

I urge everyone to visit the the right to education website of Bir Zeit University to get a taste of what students go through to get to go to school in occupied Palestine (and yes, please help and act or at least email them with your encouragement). The site is at <http://right2edu.birzeit.edu>.

We spent nearly three hours with Abdul Jawd Saleh, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (author, intellectual, previously mayor of El-Bireh who was deported by the Israelis and return to become minister of Agriculture). He was so kind with his time inviting us to a great meal and he stayed with us the whole time and we were interrupted only for his brief interview with Sky TV network. His insight into the elections and history of the Palestinian struggle was especially poignant (he is 73 years old so he has seen a lot).

Later we visited with Jean Zaru and her guest Cathy Bergen (American Friends Service Committee, <http://www.afsc.org>). The Quakers had an uninterrupted presence in Palestine for over 100 years. Palestinian Quakers have been leaders in non-violent resistance to colonization, occupation, and segregation/apartheid. I first met Jean face to face a couple of years ago in a Sabeel conference in North Carolina where I was impressed by her ability to speak passionately, eloquently, and effectively for Palestinian rights especially the right of Return.

Ramallah had so much to offer us but we had to go back to brave the checkpoints (which doubled on the way back!). At one point it was interesting to see a traffic accident and observe how settlers could not bear the idea of being stuck in traffic like every one else. Jewish settlers with their yellow licence plates wiz right through checkpoints while Palestinian cars arte held back for examination not really searching for weapons, simply harassment). In this case of a car accident you could see their exploding frustration to be treated equal to non-Jews. Ah, a glimpse of what it would mean to have no discrimination based on religion(in either privilege or hardship)!

On the same day I heard the good news that the World Council of Churches, the main global body uniting non-Catholic Christians, “has encouraged members to sell off investments in companies profiting from Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories” (Reuters). This follows on the heels of similar calls by the Presbyterian General Assembly. For lists of companies human right activists think should be boycotted and encouraged to divest, see <http://boycottisraeligoods.org>

The next day we met with the YMCA/YWCA staff in Beit Sahour (see <http://www.ej-ymca.org>), the Holy Land Trust (non-violence training and action for Palestine), BADIL (www.Badil.org), and a student advocacy group for students of Bethlehem University.

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<http://qumsiyeh.org>