

Visit to the West Bank, Palestine

May/June 2016



I am writing after a visit in late May/ early June to West Bank, Palestine. I went with the Kennington/Bethlehem link which aims to foster friendship and understanding between the people of Kennington and those of Bethlehem. We aim to promote and

**Entrance to Aida
Refugee Camp,
West Bank,
Palestine**



encourage linking projects between Kennington and Bethlehem particularly of a cultural, sporting, educational and interfaith nature.

Our visit to Palestine was wide ranging and included visiting and talking with Palestinians, Europeans and Israelis from the UN, British Council, Ramallah, Bethlehem and East Jerusalem, the Aida refugee camp, schools and colleges, settlements, and numerous community activities including community theatre and those which promote well being

There is so much to describe but three aspects particularly impacted on me:

(1) The Wall



It is unmissable and an ugly reminder of the inequities and realities of Palestinian life. The barrier began in 2002 in the second intafada to prevent suicide bombers coming into Israel. Additionally the Wall serves to provide security to the Israeli settlements by encircling them.

In July 2004 the International Court of Justice ruled Israel has the right to build a physical barrier if necessary for security but on the Green Line (the 1948 border agreed by the UN) or in Israel only.

To date 460 km of a planned 700 km wall have been erected, 85% in the West Bank. It is 9m high concrete slabs with, in parts barbed wire above and watch towers along its length. The planned length is double that of the Green Line.

85% of the wall built to date is inside the West Bank and thus illegal. Its main impact according to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)

is to cut farmers off from their land. Permits are needed to access their land and these are often very difficult to obtain. Even with permits the access gates are not opened regularly.

There are 60 checkpoints along the wall. The UN has monitored access to work and identified over 500 closures, road blocks, and mounds and ditches which make travel very hard. In travelling from East Jerusalem to Ramallah on a public bus we experienced the inspection by Israeli troops, saw the removal of an elderly man, plus his luggage from the bus and experienced the delays caused. This was a one off experience for me. I would find it hard to tolerate on a daily basis.

(2) The Settlements



In International law all settlements are illegal and breach the Geneva Convention, Article 49 which states that, 'the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies'.

In 2014, there were 573,000 settlers, with 150 settlements formally managed by Municipal Councils and Regional Councils

In the West Bank, The Regional Council which includes the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea controls virtually all the East side of the West Bank (except Jericho) 42.7% of this land is thus not available to Palestinians or the Palestinian Authority.

In addition there are 100 outposts - unauthorised by the Israeli government but which receive water and other services. These tend to be run by a mix of immigrants and native Israelis.

(3) Access to Water (Ref 1)

Since the beginning of its occupation of the West Bank in 1967 Israel has established and maintained a system of direct control over the exploitation and distribution of West Bank water resources. This system, which includes a restrictive permit regime applying to the development of any water related infrastructure, has been operated to the benefit of the Israeli population both in Israel and in the settlements, at the expense of the water needs and rights of the Palestinians.

Water consumption

WHO recommendation – 100 litres/ capita/day

Israeli domestic needs in West Bank and Israel – 300l/c/d

Palestinians – 70l/c/d

All the Settlements recognised by Israel as well as many unauthorised outposts are connected to the water network and serviced by the Israeli national water authority (Mekorot) from wells in the West Bank and in Israel.

Following the Oslo accords, an Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC) was established and given the authority to regulate the use of water resources in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPT) The mechanism granted Israel the ability to veto or delay water related projects (including in Areas A and B)see ref2

Projects to be implemented in area C, (Ref 2) which covers over 60% of the West Bank also require a permit by the ICA (Israeli Civil Administration) which is exclusively run by Israel. This requirement, as interpreted by Israel, applies even to the renovation of existing wells and cisterns. This has resulted in the rejection and delay of dozens of water projects submitted by the Palestinian Authority.

300,000 Palestinians across the West Bank are vulnerable to water scarcity. Particularly vulnerable are herding communities, for example Bedouin, in Area C



References:

Ref 1 UN OCHA oPT Special focus March 2012 The Humanitarian impact of the takeover of Palestinian Water Springs by Israeli Settlers

Ref 2 Areas A B and C (information from b'tselem, the Israeli information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied areas)

The Interim Agreements of the Oslo Accords, between Israel and the PLO, divided the West Bank into three categories: Area A, currently comprising about 18% of the land in the West Bank, which includes all the Palestinian cities and most of the Palestinian population of the West Bank; the Palestinian Authority (PA) is endowed with most governmental powers this area. Area B, comprises approximately 22% of the West Bank and encompasses large rural areas; Israel retains security control of the area and transferred control of civil matters to the PA. Area C covers 60% of the West Bank (about 330,000 hectares); Israel has retained almost complete control of this area, including security matters and all land-related civil matters, including land allocation, planning and construction, and infrastructure. The PA is responsible for providing education and medical services to the Palestinian population in Area C. However, construction and maintenance of the infrastructure necessary for these services remains in Israel's hands. Civil matters remained under Israeli control in Area C and are the responsibility of the Civil Administration.

The division into areas was to have been temporary and meant to enable an incremental transfer of authority to the Palestinian Authority. It was not designed to address the needs of long-term demographic growth. Yet this "temporary" arrangement has remained in force for nearly twenty years. Areas A and B were defined by drawing lines around Palestinian population centers at the time the Interim Agreement was signed. Some 2.4 million Palestinian residents live in these areas, which are subdivided into 165 separate units of land that have no territorial contiguity.

All areas surrounding Areas A and B were defined as Area C, which does have territorial contiguity. Area C encompasses nearly all of the land in the eastern part of the West Bank, from the eastern slopes of the mountains of Samaria to the Jordan River, as well as broad swathes of land in the west and centre of the West Bank. Area C includes all 125 Israeli settlements in the West Bank, as well as the vast tracts of land Israel defined as being the jurisdictions of the local and regional councils of the settlements. These areas cover some 210,000 hectares – approximately 63% of Area C – and include the majority of state land. Beginning in the mid-1990s, approximately 100 illegal settlement outposts – established without formal permission from state authorities, but with their encouragement and assistance – were also established in Area C.

19-9-2016