

Between 7 - 20 October I travelled to the region, with Pax Christi colleague Ann Farr. I first visited Israel in 1999 when Pax Christi International held its International Council in Amman, Jordan and Jerusalem. We did not go into the West Bank. This was before the days of the wall and the huge border checkpoints. Before the expansion of settlements and the creation of the by-pass roads that serve them. Tragically these are now fixed features of the illegal occupation. They have become the only known reality for a generation of Palestinians and Israelis. How easy, and dangerous it is, to 'get used to' such things. Twenty years and nine visits on, I needed to be reminded that this is not normal. So, rather than a chronological report, this is more a reflection on my experiences and the encounters with people I met.

Entrances, exists and life in between.

Entering Bethlehem

Checkpoint 300 between Israel and the West Bank entrance to Bethlehem is even more developed and 'normalised'. The entrance on the Israeli side carries the jaunty message Bon Voyage. Is this a joke? This entrance is used primarily by those Palestinians returning from work or hospital visits in Israel and by some tourists. Large numbers of people are squeezed through two turn-stiles and a long, dirty enclosed walk-way into Bethlehem. Getting out is worse, but more of that later.

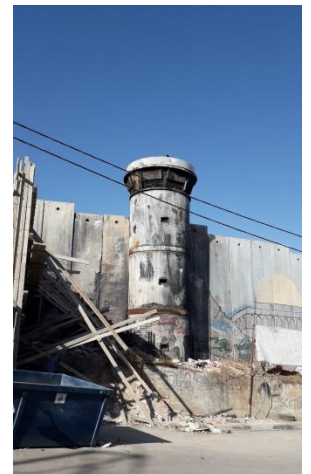
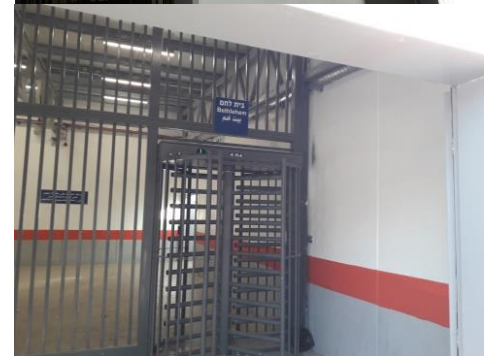
This checkpoint is controlled by the Israeli government and staffed by border police and sometimes soldiers. We were surprised to discover that it was to be completely closed for a night and a day on the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur. I assume that part of the reason was that a public holiday in Israel meant that workers were not needed? Another was probably that more people would be visiting Rachel's Tomb during these holiday days - a site now open primarily to Jewish visitors. The wall, checkpoint and watch-towers in this area are there to protect these visitors and the military camp that is adjacent to it.

Entering the Aida Refugee camp

A short walk from the checkpoint brings you to the Aida Refugee Camp, established in 1949. Above its entrance the iconic key - a symbol of the desire to return home. The camp covers only 7 acres yet is home to 5 thousand people, 1/3 of whom are children. The separation wall has been built right up against the camp, taking away olive groves that were once a space for play and recreation. At another entrance to the camp is the luxurious Jacir Palace Hotel with its swimming pool and spa and then the Banksy 'Walled Off Hotel' that attracts tourists to the wall. On another side is a Muslim cemetery. Huge contrasts in styles of life in such a small, contested area made me feel uneasy.

Statistics and resources

- There are 58 recognized Palestine refugee camps providing homes to 5.4 million Palestinian refugees, in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The largest camps in Bethlehem are Dheisheh, Aida and Beit Jibrin.
Source: www.unrwa.org/palestine
- Video from B'tselem on the take-over of land since 1967 <https://conquer-and-divide.btselem.org/map-en.html>
- Aida Youth Centre www.aidacenter.org/#home



The in between - joys, hopes and fears

In between are the people, those I have known for twenty years and new friends made on more recent visits, who help to challenge my thinking that any of this is normal.

We stayed with a Palestinian family whose house, pre 1947 built, is just meters from the exit of the checkpoint. Stepping into their courtyard is stepping into an oasis of calm and offers a glimpse of how life should be. Families living together, able to work freely in their olive groves, to play, to sit out and keep company with one another. Yet, our conversations are about visas not granted, sadness of being unable to visit family in the UK, the hassles of living so close to the checkpoint and fears of tear-gas and military incursions.

At the Aida Youth Center Mohammad and Anas were our hosts. I had special interest in visiting them as my local Kennington Bethlehem Link group support their work. Bright, energetic, informed and courteous they exemplified so many of the young adults we met. Their centre faces the wall - Mohammad told us about the 'guerrilla gardening' where they tried to beautify the space. Sadly their attempt was thwarted by the Israeli military. The UN school is being re-built having been under attack several times in recent years and now impacted by the cutting of funding to UNWRA by the United States. Education is disrupted for many reasons, including the detention and imprisonment of children, so the centre has started after-school classes to supplement what is missed. We visited maths classes, run by young women teachers.

In the background we heard beautiful music. Three young women were playing the oud and keyboard and we saw drums, violins too. Tareq runs music classes and he is also working on a story telling project with the children exploring ways of turning these into mini publications. The team are politically savvy too. They want to make a link with the Walled Off Hotel, perhaps create a visual pathway from the Hotel to draw tourists beyond the Banksy view of Palestine and experience the camp. They have formed good links with communities in Europe and have been on speaking tours. A feature of every camp is the Popular Committee and Anas and Mohammad advocate here for young people and women.

In the heart of Bethlehem town is the house of L'Arche Bethlehem, Ma'an lil-Hayat, which means 'Together for Life', A world-wide initiative of the late Jean Vanier, this house opened in 2009 to bring together people with and without intellectual disabilities who work and share the day together. This is a non-residential house (unlike most) with 39 students Christians and Muslims, from in and around Bethlehem, working alongside staff and volunteers. Due to demand, a satellite project has been set up in the village of Dar Salah in cooperation with the village council. The focus of the day is in the workshop activities which develop skills, social interaction and offer fun too. We took part in several sessions, preparing local raw wool for felting which is then used to create goods for sale. There was something very familiar about their approach: soaking the wool, beating it, rolling it. Yes, the same ancient tradition of 'waulking of the wool' that I had come across in Scotland. Needless to say, we were pretty useless but they were patient with us, sharing their energy, love and humour.

In recent years Pax Christi has bought and sold some of their goods, a small but effective way of supporting and shining a light on this life-giving community.



Statistics and resources

- UNWRA is responsible for 96 schools in the West Bank and 274 in Gaza. 325,200 pupils are enrolled in these schools (Source: www.unrwa.org/)
- Around 500-700 Palestinian children are arrested, detained and prosecuted in the Israeli military court system. (Source: Defence for Children International, Palestine www.dci-palestine.org/)
- L'Arche, www.maanolilhayat.ps

Bethlehem partners

The Arab Educational Institute is a Pax Christi partner, based in the Sumud House near Rachel's Tomb. Their schools programme *Citizenship and Diversity: Christian-Moslem Living Together* is well received and offered in 30 schools in the Bethlehem, Ramallah and now Hebron. They also run The *Wall Information Centre*, based on their Wall Museum project - a visual project of posters telling stories of the impact of occupation on the lives of ordinary people, including some of the 64 families and businesses forced to move when the wall was built. The posters are displayed on many parts of the Wall around Bethlehem. Recently Director Rania took the Women's Group to visit women in a Bedouin camp - an act of solidarity and a huge eye-opener for the women of Bethlehem.

Zoughbi is the Director of Wi'am a Palestinian Conflict Resolution and Transformation Centre. With an open-door policy the centre is buzzing with locals and international groups who come for briefings and up-dates on the situation in Palestine, what Wi'am call citizen diplomacy. They also offer traditional Sulha Mediation for local and family disputes. A go-to place for many, we met with groups from London, Sweden and the United States as well as a number of Methodist and Lutheran ministers who work in Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

The work of individual friends is powerful too. Some years the Presentation Sisters made a commitment to working in Palestine and three are now settled in Bethlehem, Silvia and Shoba from India and Anna from Zimbabwe. Living in a flat on the road leading to Hebron these women form an international presence and bring their gifts of nursing, rehabilitation, pastoral support and accountancy to groups in Bethlehem and to the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. They took time to determine the needs of those around them and now offer nursing support, yoga and meditation workshops, bringing healing, and friendship to those who are ill or stressed or who have been abandoned.

These initiatives are faith-based with Christians and Muslims working together. The faithful persistence of these workers, the SUMUD, is a quality that cannot be overestimated. They facilitate mutual support and build strength among those facing the daily realities of occupation. This is not the edgy, front-line work for peace but the anxious daily toil of building trust and hope, creating in the moment the community, the region, of the future.

The regular Friday night walking prayer at the Wall illustrates this. At 6.00pm people gather, from Bethlehem University, the Caritas Children's Hospital, the nearby Benedictine Convent, Wi'am, EAPPI, visitors who may be in Bethlehem and local people gather by the exit of the checkpoint. Walking slowly, almost as if in meditation, the Rosary is prayed, in Arabic, English and whatever languages are present in the group. There is also a time of silence once they reach the Icon of Our Lady at the Wall. This small act of witness and solidarity reclaims a harsh and ugly space, even for a short time.

Statistics and resources

- The Arab Educational Institute, www.aeicenter.org
- Wi'am Center, www.alashlah.org
- The Wall Museum - stories of resistance. Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvlyuQl2t04>
- Images from Wall Museum, www.facebook.com/wallmuseum



Entering Hebron and the 'between' communities

The local bus from Bethlehem to Hebron was packed with shoppers, workers and students. Our goal for the day was to meet with members of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and with Christian Peacemakers Teams (CPT). A bustling market town and home of the Tombs of the Patriarchs/Al-Ibrahimi Mosque, a holy site for Jews and Muslims, Hebron amplifies many of the features of occupation. Since 1997 the city has been divided with H1, the larger area, under Palestinian control and H2, including parts of the old city, under Israeli control. 700 settlers live in H2, protected by almost twice as many IDF soldiers. Around 7,000 Palestinians still live in this area, 1,000 of whom are in and around Shuhada Street, where most of the settlers' reside.

Walking through the old city we soon met up with our EAPPI and CPT friends who had just been alerted to the movement of military vehicles and IDF soldiers through the city, and sure enough they came rolling along. It was a strange sensation, seeing such vehicles rumbling through the tiny, ancient streets. We followed them to one of the main checkpoints that leads to Shuhada Street where the military mounted a presence. We realised that Jewish and Christian tourists* would be coming to Hebron to visit the Tombs as part of the celebration of Sukkot, Feast of Tabernacles, hence the additional security. The Palestinian schools inside H2 had closed early and Palestinians were unable to enter Shuhada Street for some time. At such times the 'protective presence' of EAPPI and CPT is essential - a witness to what is happening, engaging with the local community whom they serve on a daily basis. Next to stalls overflowing with fruit and vegetables were heavily armed young IDF soldiers, border police, military vehicles and Palestinians, trying to go about their daily business.

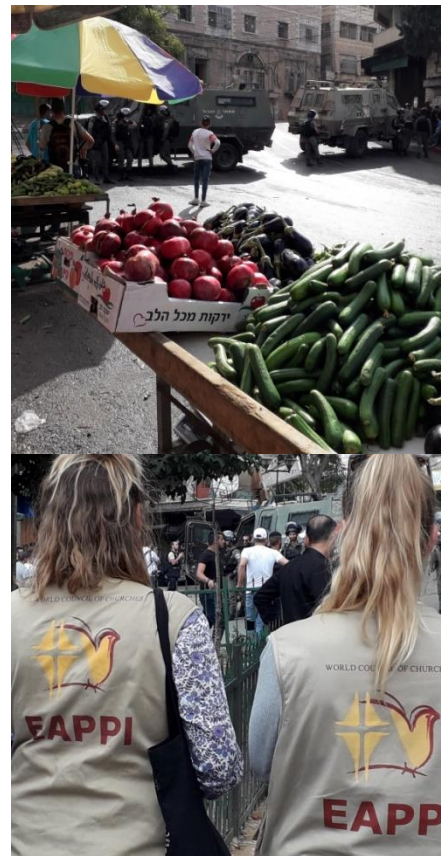
We were eventually able to get through Checkpoint 56 into Shuhada Street. There was a real spirit of celebration for the hundreds of tourists who disembarked from coaches, many from the United States. None of the Palestinian residents were out that day. Of course people of faith should be able to visit their religious sites in safety and freedom but surely not at the expense of the oppression and degradation of others? For 25 years this community has been divided. Palestinian children and families mostly only experience the fearful, violent side of their settler neighbours and the soldiers who 'protect' them. From other contexts we know that policies of divide and rule, segregation and impoverishment only exacerbate injustice and tension.

There is great beauty too in Hebron, through the painstaking work of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, restoring buildings and ancient sites, such as the Sesame Press we visited in Al Qasaba Street with its great stone press, ovens and oil-decanting systems, conveying the skills and traditions of another time.

On the bus back, I sat next to Dina, an engineering student at Hebron University, returning home to Bethlehem. It was good to discover how many young women do study engineering, but sad to hear that few can get jobs. We spoke about the importance of restoration projects and links between architecture and engineering. Her English was perfect, honed, by watching YouTube, and the encouragement of her parents. She spoke of the freedom she enjoys as a young Muslim woman - able to study, travel alone and drive, and of her desire to travel outside Palestine when she can. A delightful encounter after the experiences in Hebron.

Statistics and resources

- There are 22 military controlled checkpoints and 64 barriers in Hebron.
- In Hebron, Ramallah and Jerusalem IDF forces carried out 79 search and arrest operations and arrested 86, including nine children. Sources www.ochaopt.org and www.btselem.org/hebron
- Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. www.int.icej.org/
- Helpful commentary on Christians and Sukkot from Dr Jack Sar, Bethlehem Bible College <http://www.comeandsee.com/view.php?sid=1380&fbclid=IwAR0Ow0vwRisXOhMsDnbEL9y8QMBFa9h9YtrqLOjFlwA1D5uDUuRdr9yFH-Y>
- Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel, www.eappi.org/en
- Christian Peacemaker Teams Hebron, <http://cptpalestine.com/>



Bedouin experiences - on the edge of everything

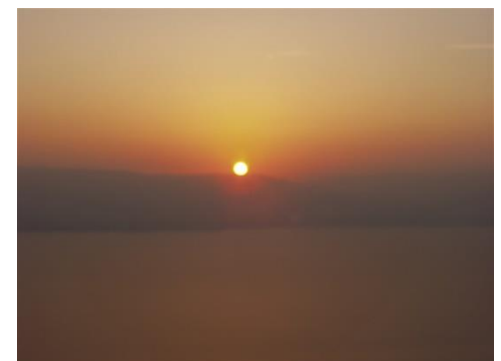
I knew it would be a once in a life-time opportunity, a night walk in the desert! Usama, one of the staff members at Wi'am offers guided over-night visits to a Bedouin camp to see the sun set and rise again. Our mini-bus took us out of Bethlehem passing the Herodian mountain and the illegal settlement of Ma'alle Amos founded in 1988. As we drove through rich, fertile land, Usama told us that three thousand of the olive trees we were passing were due to be 'uprooted, they had been served by demolition orders. We stopped at the tiny hamlet of Kisan where just days before two newly build houses had been demolished by the Israeli government. The families had created a make-shift tented area to sit in during the day. Jacob, the father, told us that the whole village was under demolition order. His sons had only been given two-days notice of the demolition of their homes. (Earlier in the week we met the wife of the head-teacher of the small school in Kisan. Her husband had to accompany children home after the demolition because of their fears and because of the tear-gas that had been used as part of the demolition process). All of this to 'protect' the ever-growing settlement of Ma'alle Amos. On average, 30 Palestinian homes are destroyed in this way every month.

Moving on was not easy but we had to reach our desert camp before sunset. Soon we were off road and driving across rocks and sand and crevices. Eventually we arrived in the camp of Rashayed to receive the hospitality of the Bedouin family of Abo Ismail. The camp houses a large extended family and has built large tented area for tourists. Around us, sheep, goats, camels, children - no sign of any of the women! On a closer look I became convinced that this was the same camp I had visited with the Pax Christi group in 2010 where we had all planted trees, part of an agricultural project with Bethlehem University. To see how they had flourished was deeply encouraging! The family are part of the Jahalin tribe, the largest refugee group in the West Bank today. We walked out into the silence of the desert, or wilderness as Usam preferred to call it, to watch the sun setting - and as it did the landscape changed moment by moment as shadows were cast and the light diminished. At one moment I looked up and it seemed as if the setting sun and the rising moon were equi-distant. Was I standing on the centre of the earth?

Back at the camp we received more Bedouin hospitality - a meal that had been cooked in an underground oven. After we ate our entertainment came in the form of a traditional singer/musician who managed to create melodious sounds from his one-stringed instrument. Such traditions and music, Usama told us, are sadly being lost. Early to bed we rose 2.00am for the walk. Skilfully guided by a young man from the camp, Usama and a full moon, we crossed sand dunes and climbed rocks and looked out for plants and wildlife about which Usama was so knowledgeable. From time to time I would slip to the back - wanting to experience this walk in the deep silence of the wilderness. We stopped at around 5.45am, with little idea of where we were. All we could see ahead were hills, with what seemed like nothing in between. As the horizon turned orange, then red we realised we were above the Dead Sea and looking towards Jordan. In 1999 I had stood on the other side, on Mount Nebo, looking out, according to tradition, as Moses had done, towards Jerusalem and the promised land.

Statistics and resources

- Find out more about the Jahalin Bedouin Solidarity Campaign www.jahalin.org/about-the-jahalin/
- Destruction of Palestinian property in the West Bank and East Jerusalem www.ochaopt.org/content/increase-destruction-palestinian-property-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem
- Understanding Israeli Interests in E1 area: Contiguity, Security and Jerusalem. Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs <http://jcpa.org/understanding-israeli-interests-in-the-e1-area/>
- Comboni Sisters Middle East <https://www.facebook.com/Comboni-Sisters-Middle-East-122756835104734/>



An in-between people

Looking east from Jerusalem towards Jericho is an area known as E1, including the Palestinian towns of Abu Dis and Ras Al Amud and Al'Izzariyya, it stretches to towards settlements such as Ma'ale Adumin and Mishor Adumim. Part of the 'in-between', contested land is the home of a number of Bedouin camps, most well-known probably is Khan Al-Ahmar. Others include Abu Nawar, Al Qasara and Al Muntar. Tragically they have become the pawns in the expansion plans of the Israeli Government who are trying to enlarge the settlements, and the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, to link Jerusalem with Ma'ale Adumin. It is here, in eight of the camps that the Comboni Sisters work. They took us to two of their communities to see the kindergartens they have helped to establish and to meet some of the teachers and a family.

Sisters Aziza and Agnese exude confidence and joy. Our drive to the first camp took us past a huge Israeli rubbish dump with rivers of black sludge running down into the only road leading to the camp. We arrived at break time, the children were playing. They called out the names of the sisters as they would friends. This kindergarten serves 14 families with its two classrooms and is staffed by young mothers from the camp who have been trained, thanks to the sisters. This is so empowering for the Bedouin women, many of whom are unable to go to secondary school or receive further education. They are allowed to work and teach in their own communities. We heard stories of drones flying over the camp to 'monitor' the life. Most of the camps are under demolition orders and are watched all the time. We heard that some of the children have to walk long distances to school, some trying to cross busy by-pass roads on route. We heard of the pride and change of attitude that has come with the development of the kindergartens. The children are better prepared for primary school and develop creative and social skills in a harsh and poorly resourced environment. During the summer the sisters organised summer camps, some involving young volunteers from Spain, and this year even managed to get permission to take some of the mothers and children to the sea, a huge achievement and an immense joy for those who took part.

The second stop was less joyful. While we were able to visit another kindergarten they also showed us the ruins of a newly built school, recently demolished by the Israeli authorities for being illegal. The wanton waste and destruction was heart-breaking. It was in this camp too that we visited a family whose life was filled with tragedy. The second wife of the family had died, leaving the first wife to look after 10 children. Three of these, her own, were born with severe disabilities, one had died. On the day of our visit we met the two surviving boys and the scale of their disability was overwhelming. Ibrahim was eighteen but looked about 9 years old. He was blind, had both legs amputated below the knee and simply dragged himself along the floor, toppling over all the time. He knew Aziza's voice and nestled up to her and they playfully teased each other, so comfortable with one another. The sisters do what they can, helping to get medicines and with their mobile clinic. They related one incident where a child was especially ill and needed hospital care. Looking down on the camp, in one of the illegal settlements, is a hospital. They rang a doctor friend there who told them to bring the child but they were refused entry into the settlement. Thankfully, the doctor was able to come to them. Living on the edge of the edge, under constant threat of losing their homes and their tradition, what hope is there for these communities?



Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem - and of the whole of this land.

Every time I visit Jerusalem the words of the Psalm comes to mind, prompting questions and judgement. Am I praying enough? Am I doing enough? Am I listening and understanding enough? These are good prompts I believe.

I do love Jerusalem, with all of its contradictions it is fascinating and a place of intersection where faiths and people meet - not always easily. The quiet oasis of Saint Anne's Basilica, Pool of Bethesda, the base of the White Fathers in the region, is a great centering place. Here, by chance I bumped into Bishops Donal McKeown, a friend of Pax Christi, with a pilgrim group from Derry. It is now also the office base for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. Jerusalem is also the place to meet Israeli's who are working for peace and human rights.

As it was Friday, we walked into West Jerusalem to join the Women in Black Jerusalem. Their witness is inspiring against the insult and opposition they face. Their message is simple, "End the Occupation" which they convey in an hour-long silent vigil held every Friday. On the day we joined them we were all verbally attacked at the end of the vigil by an opposition group who protest regularly. We were all called Nazis and sympathisers of killers and told to get out of the country. I felt this must have been especially hurtful to the regular group of women, most of whom would have been of the generation whose families were killed in the Holocaust. One delight of the visit was passing on a card from the WiB London, a group I support, with messages of love, admiration and solidarity.

On another day I visited the Museum on the Seam, established in 1999 in a neo-classical building that was bombed and shelled in the six-day war - and still carries these scars. Its aim is to explore difficult, contentious social issues. While there I saw video presentations about Yazidis women, an exhibition entitled *Democracy Now*, exploring what remains of the promise for a new world of equal rights and *The Crying Game*, etchings of the world of women and girls as war victims by the Dutch artist Marcelle Hanslaar. Art can play a vital role in helping us see and understand one another at another level. It can cross boundaries and barriers. One thing did disturb me - and I shared it with the young woman working there. Why were none of the captions or descriptions in Arabic? Others had obviously asked the same question and she explained that it was to do with money and not exclusion, paying for another level of translation, when the whole project is under financial threat, had been difficult, but they knew it was a weakness in honouring the philosophy of the project. Maybe on my next visit this will be remedied.

Exiting

Leaving Bethlehem on foot, through Checkpoint 300 is an essential part of a visit. This is the route that hundreds of Palestinians take every day. Those who have permits to work, go to University, for hospital appointments in Jerusalem, some queuing from 4.00am in the morning. The entrance sign reads, 'Welcome to Rachel's Tomb - Humanitarian entry lane'. A tomb that no Palestinian can visit. The Checkpoint is a grim place that plays games with people. Since my last visit it has been 'modernised', it now has the facility for electronic checking of passports and permits. But on the days when I passed through, none of these worked. One has to pass through three turn-stiles, a physical security check and a document security check to get to the 'other' side. While there are a good number of security booths, I only ever saw one staffed. Imagine the congestion between 4.00am and 6.00am for the workers? On one journey, an elderly Palestinian women struggled with a heavy bag so I helped her through the turn-stiles and along the ugly walk-ways and out to the bus that goes into Jerusalem. Not much 'humanitarian' help here! I am always stunned at the patience of the people making this journey - delayed, shouted at by eighteen-year old police or soldiers, sometimes stripped and even refused entry.



On the day we departed friends in Jerusalem had booked a taxi to come and collect us and our luggage to take us to the shared taxi to the airport. Trying to do this as a 'normal' person, and not a tourist on a bus or with a group, is so complicated! We waited and waited. A phone call to our hosts informed us that the driver was stuck. Unable to come through Checkpoint 300 because he did not have the right car number plate, he had to make a detour via the Beit Jala checkpoint, and then into Bethlehem, adding quite some time to the journey. While we had left plenty of time - aware of such delays - it offered a tiny glimpse of the frustrations and delays faced by Palestinians every day.

What did I come away with? Mixed feelings and frustration, certainly, and now anxious with the new surge in violence between the people of Gaza, Hamas and the Israeli military. I am indeed reminded that none of this is 'normal', but perhaps more aware that for those who live here permanently, Palestinians and Israelis, survival is paramount - whether that is physical, emotional or psychological. So the friend whose wife of 30+ years, who has lived with him in Bethlehem for most of those years but who has been denied entry back into Palestine, struggles, not to be overcome with anger by what the Israeli government has done to his family. The Jewish women in Jerusalem return, week after week, to face violence and deliberate mis-representation, because this is what they **can** do and so they must. Those who gather to pray at the wall each Friday, bringing their bodies and their words to the wall of separation, as an act of hope and faith, because this is what they **can** do and so they must.

We can 'be with' one another in many ways, accompaniment, witness, prayer, story-telling, walking, sharing food, all very immediate, human forms of solidarity. We can also 'be with' one another at a distance, when we share their story, advocate on their behalf, challenge policies that deny their rights and destroy their communities, seek justice together. This is what I / we can do and so we must.

Statistics and resources

- Women in Black International: <http://womeninblack.org/about-women-in-black/>
- Museum on the Seam <https://www.mots.org.il/about>
- Checkpoint 300 : A crossing point in the Separation Barrier between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Staffed around the clock by the military, Border Police and private security companies. The checkpoint has an extensive infrastructure and is defined as a terminal. Palestinians are not allowed to cross into Jerusalem unless they hold entry permits into Israel or are East Jerusalem residents. Israeli tourist buses are allowed to enter Bethlehem only through this crossing.
Source B'tselem https://www.btselem.org/topic/freedom_of_movement
- More of my photographs of the visit : <https://www.flickr.com/photos/184717952@N03/albums>
- Pax Christi www.paxchristi.org.uk



<https://twitter.com/scutumfero>



<https://www.facebook.com/pat.gaffney.94>