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Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel

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For twenty years, Ecumenical Accompaniers have been present on the occupied West Bank and in Israel to observe and witness and to tell the international community what is happening in the everyday life of people living in this volatile context. Impartiality and nonviolence are some of the watchwords of the Ecumenical Accompaniment. Its mandate is to infuse hope in a seemingly hopeless situation and to point to the possibilities in a geographically and politically small space.

Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel

A passion for the possible

Manuel Quintero

Bedouins evoke romantic images of camel breeding and nomadic life, as well as the desert's deceitful beauty. Actually, they are among the poorest and most marginalised communities in Palestine and Israel, increasingly forced to adopt a sedentary lifestyle in derelict houses in slum areas, with little or no access to clean water, electricity or other basic services. Bedouins are the residents of the village Khan Al Ahmar located east of Jerusalem. The closest school is in Jericho, 14 km away. The children of Khan Al Ahmar used to walk there, but after four of them were killed in traffic accidents on the highway, the villagers agreed to build their own school.[1]

However, Khan Al Ahmar is located within the so-called 'Area C', the area under full Israeli civil and security control that comprises over 60 per cent of the West Bank. The restrictions enforced by the Israeli authorities practically impede Palestinians to get building permits in that area. Any Palestinian construction – house or school – faces the risk of demolition. Thus, the unassuming school, built with support from an Italian NGO and made up of of old car tires and dried mud, was immediately slated for demolition by the Israeli Civil Administration.

Called to help, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) contacted the Middle East correspondent of the newspaper The Australian and told him that the demolition of the school would mean that the Bedouin girls would never receive an education. The correspondent visited the Khan al-Ahmar community with a member of the EAPPI local reference group and produced an in-depth feature[2] that served to draw the attention of the international community.

Following the international media attention, in October 2012 the Israeli Supreme Court rejected a petition by settlers to demolish the school.

This story corroborates a well-established claim in the literature on peacebuilding: that protection together with advocacy for change is highly relevant and effective as a peacebuilding instrument during ongoing conflicts.[3] Aside from providing protection and decreasing levels of violence, EAPPI's work strengthens civil society and community resilience and creates space for future change. What makes EAPPI particularly effective is that it combines protection with monitoring activities and advocacy campaigns, and sustains its efforts by a media outreach strategy and close cooperation with international agencies and local NGOs. In the case of protection, experience has shown that its effectiveness is higher when the cases are picked up by the media.

A history of dispossession and exclusion

The historical coexistence between Palestinians and Jews was dealt a severe blow by the way Jews established themselves in Palestine in the last century. Had Martin Buber's perspective on the Jewish state prevailed, perhaps today we would have a different reality, and there would not be a need for EAPPI to exist. As Buber wrote in a well-known letter to Gandhi: "We have no desire to dispossess them: we want to live with them. We do not want to dominate them: we want to serve with them".[4] But what ultimately triumphed was a Zionist perspective, which from the outset sought the creation of an Israeli state for Jews only, an ethnic state, as Israeli historians as Ilan Pappé have convincingly shown.[5] That perspective has meant the tragic dispossession and exclusion of the Palestinian people in a 65-year long history of injustice that seems to defy the best attempts at solution. Numerous peacebuilding initiatives were launched after the Oslo Agreements in the 1990s and plenty of resources put at the disposal of governments and civil society to set up the structures and mindset needed to guarantee a lasting peace. Certainly, they contributed to mitigating the harsh conditions imposed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and to nurturing a sense of hope in small sectors in both the Palestinian and the Israeli communities. But real peace is as elusive today as it was twenty years ago.

> ***"Any Palestinian construction faces the risk of demolition."***

As one observer has written, "the conflict over Palestine has settled into a kind of dynamic stalemate. The state of Israel pursues a strategy of escalating brutality against Palestinian civilian society. The dominant forces on the Palestinian side oscillate between attacks on civilians in Israel and concessions to Israeli demands. Each side

chooses from a limited and predictable menu of responses which do not alter the underlying balance of forces. The dynamics of this brutal standoff are raising the temperature in each society and bringing internal divisions into play. Glimpses of more promising initiatives can be seen on the ground, but they are eclipsed by the military/paramilitary players who set the rhythm and pace of the conflict".[6]

A shrinking space

EAPPI is operating in the West Bank, a small territorial space[7] where freedom of movement is seriously hampered, as well as in an overall shrinking political space due to growing theocratic, right leaning trends and policies in Israel.

Since 1967, a number of measures have severely curtailed Palestinian freedom of movement in the occupied territories, including the implementation by Israel of permanent, temporary and random manned checkpoints, the revocation of residence rights, and the need for Palestinians to have travels permits or special permits for access to their own lands issued by Israeli authorities. Additionally, Israeli citizens are forbidden from travelling through regions controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

A particularly critical development in Israel is the emergence of what may ultimately become a theocratic state, a pure Israel with 'no Arabs' and 'no gentiles', as portrayed in graffiti in some streets in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Current trends within the Knesset show the increasing power of political and religious fundamentalism and that of ideological alliances which move away from the Jewish legal tradition and its moral standards that were the basis of a genuine democracy. A theocratic Israel would close down whatever spaces remain open for the exercise of dissent and opposition, clamping down on the civic and political rights of its own people.

> ***A particularly critical development in Israel is the emergence of what may ultimately become a theocratic state.***



PHOTO: EAPPI

Bedouins are among the most marginalised communities in Palestine and Israel, often living in very poor circumstances without access to clean water or electricity, like in this village near East Jerusalem.

That was reflected in some measures passed by the Knesset in 2011, amongst them the one that allowed civil suits against those who advocated a boycott against the Israeli state or West Bank settlements. Other proposed legislation included a bill that would restrict the funding of certain nongovernmental organisations considered enemies of the State of Israel.

Good Samaritan and Prophet

EAPPI is not a typical peacebuilding endeavour as defined in the literature, i.e. a set of activities and processes that focus on the root causes of the conflict, rather than just the effects, support the rebuilding and rehabilitation of all sectors of the war-torn society, encourage and support interaction between all sectors of society in order to repair damaged relations and start the process of restoring dignity and trust, and so on.[8]

Rather, the ecumenical commitment to the cause of a just peace in Palestine and Israel requires both humanitarian aid (the Good Samaritan = the Ecumenical Accompanier who shares the suffering and aspirations of the community and lives the horrors of the occupation) and political solidarity (the Prophet = the Ecumenical Accompanier engaged in advocacy). The work of the Ecumenical Accompaniers encompasses these two complementary dimensions: they wake up very early each day to be present at the checkpoints, even recognising that their presence may be useless, but also hoping it can mean something positive for those Palestinians suffering daily humiliation. And then, back to their countries, to tell, as objectively as possible, what they have seen and heard, and advocate a just solution to the conflict, one that allows Palestinians and Israelis the opportunity of living in peace and harmony as good neighbours.

Since its inception in 2002, EAPPI has endeavoured to carefully assess the needs in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and decided where to place the Ecumenical Accompaniers. Tasks were strategically designed according to the mandate of the programme and with a conflict-sensitive approach. As the needs are manifold and diverse, EAPPI does not cover all geographical areas and has to limit its field of engagement to particularly vulnerable communities. EAPPI staff invests a lot of energy into the needs assessment process in order to use the scarce resources in the best possible way. In addition to the programme's own tools and knowledge, the coordination unit consults with other local partners, INGOs, grassroots organisations, the ICRC and UN agencies.

In the city of Hebron, the EAPPI teams have been accompanying the pupils and the teachers of the Cordoba School on their way to and from school, crossing a checkpoint and passing by the Israeli settlement Beit Hadassah. Palestinians living in the Tel Rumeida quarter are often attacked and harassed by Israeli rightwing settlers living illegally in the city's H2 area.

The teams in Jerusalem and Bethlehem report daily humiliating treatment of the thousands of people trying to pass through the checkpoints in order to reach workplaces and health services in Jerusalem. People start queuing as early as 3 in the morning, especially at Checkpoint 300, the main southern entrance into the greater Jerusalem area from Bethlehem, and Qalandiya checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah. Many climb the railing of the fences leading to the turnstiles in order to pass the queue and jump into the opening of the turnstiles, which causes anger and chaos at the checkpoints.

Listening, nonviolent, impartial

Some features that explain EAPPI's effectiveness and impact over its ten years of existence could be summarised as follows:

1. EAPPI exists and is carried out in response to a call from local churches and it is accountable to these churches through a local committee in which Christians, Muslims and Jews are all represented. That allows the programme to constantly receive feedback from the communities it intends to serve..
2. EAPPI does not take sides in the conflict, practising what it calls principled impartiality. It is EAPPI's unwavering conviction that occupation harms both Palestinians and Israelis alike. EAPPI underlines the need to discern the right thing to do in order to ensure security, peace and humanity *for each and every one of the actors in the conflict*, now and in the future.
3. Ecumenical Accompaniers are always willing to listen when Palestinians and Israelis feel the need to share their stories and suffering. The willingness to listen to and to tell those stories to a wider audience helps build trust and confidence in the relationships.
4. Although EAPPI's mission speaks of "the end of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories", it is no secret that such a big objective will only be achieved when the critical mass of public opinion needed to change the policies of some countries that still unconditionally support the State of Israel is finally reached, and when far-reaching changes take place in both Palestinian and Israeli communities. EAPPI is aware that patience is essential in such a protracted conflict and that *the conflict can only be overcome when the legitimate needs and interests of all the actors and parties involved are met*.
5. EAPPI is committed to nonviolence, it is the only way. However, it also recognises that local nonviolent resistance will not end the occupation unless it is linked to a clear political vision and strategy and becomes a national movement to include the participation of urban populations, the broad spectrum of civil society organisations and the presence of Israelis and internationals.



PHOTO: E. MEYER, EAPPI

An EAPPI volunteer visits a family in Nu'man, Jerusalem, whose home has just been demolished. In 2012, over 600 Palestinian buildings in the West Bank were demolished, including at least 189 residential structures, making 880 people homeless, more than half of them children.

Hope and Sumoud

Not all are success stories, though. An Nassariya is a rural agricultural community in Area B of the Nablus governorate. On 8 September 2011, Israeli forces destroyed three of the village's wells with a bulldozer. The army confiscated pumps, engines, filters and 4,000 litres of gasoline (at 7 NI S per litre), and threw the owners' tools into the wells. They did not show a demolition order to anybody present. The demolition affected the livelihoods of 350 families.

Nagahe Zaad, a local farmer said, "I plant tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, melons, aubergines, peppers and many other things. Our sheep eat the foliage after we have harvested. Now we have no water and we cannot plant and our sheep drink the sewage water from the open canal. When [the demolition] happened, I just stood there. I felt so angry, but there was nothing I could do. It took about three to four hours and it all happened right before my eyes ... We are willing to live with Israelis and we will share our water. I, along with the two other owners of wells, have decided that we shall now rebuild only one well, so we can share the costs. But this means that we will produce less, and we know the Israelis will destroy our wells again, but I have been a farmer all my life. My father and grandfather also farmed on this land. We now live with this, we will not move."

Indeed, there is something truly admirable in the Palestinians' resistance, what they define as Sumoud, which roughly translates as steadfastness. In the worst possible circumstances, Palestinian society is not defeated, nor has it collapsed completely. Children continue going to school, men and women go to work, and people keep living. Hundreds of NGOs testify to that vitality and enable the society to continue functioning despite the daily efforts of the Israeli government to hamper and destroy it.

In a striking dialectical process, Palestinian Sumoud inspires EAPPI, whereas Ecumenical Accompaniers' presence and testimony continue nurturing Palestinian hope against all hope. EAPPI believes that upholding hope is meaningful, even when there seems to be no hope. That was the existential experience of Abraham: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations."

For Christians, hope comes from faith in a risen Christ who overcomes the chains of sin and in a God who is in solidarity with the oppressed. That hope strengthens faith and leads the believer to a life of love and commitment in the struggles that seek to transform the structures of society to make them more just. That hope, as Moltmann has said, creates in the believer a "passion for the possible".[9]

Ecumenical Accompaniers are aware that their protective presence in communities and their work and advocacy efforts back home have a limited impact on ending the occupation. But they continue joining EAPPI because they feel a moral imperative to do something to change things, and because they are nurtured by that hope which creates in them *a passion for the possible.*

1 Some 15 per cent of 113 West Bank communities surveyed in a mapping exercise by Save the Children UK, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, many of them in Area C, reported that school children and youth must walk along busy or dangerous routes to get to school. Save the Children, Fact Sheet: Children's Right to Education in Armed Conflict, October 2011.

2 http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/bedouin-village-loses-battle-on-demolition/story-e6frg6so-1226483738349

3 Cf. Thania Paffenholz: Civil Society and Peace Building http://graduateinstitute.ch/webdav/site/ccdp/shared/6305/CCDP-Working-Paper-4-Civil-Society.pdf

4 Martin Buber's Open Letter Regarding Gandhi to Palestine (February 24, 1939) in http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/buber1.html

5 Particularly in his acclaimed The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine (London and New York: Oneworld, 2006)

6 Kai Frithjof Brand-Jacobsen: Palestine and Israel: Improving Civil Society Peacebuilding Strategies, Design and Impact, http://www.novatrainings.org/userfiles/files/Peacebuilding_ANG.pdf

7 The West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has an area of only 5,860 km^2, and the total area of Palestine is 6,020 km^2 if the Gaza Strip is included. In terms of its territorial extension, Palestine ranks 172 in a list of 242 sovereign states and their dependent territories (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_and_dependencies_by_area). Yet, in a list of population density of sovereign states and dependent territories, it occupies position 15, with 713 habitants per km^2. In comparison, Sweden has a population density of 23 habitants per km^2. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sovereign_states_and_dependent_territories_by_population_density)

8 Cf. Rebecca Spence, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Who Determines the Peace?" in Bronwyn Evans-Kent & Roland Bleiker (eds) Rethinking Humanitarianism Conference Proceedings, 24-26 September 2001 (St Lucia: University of Queensland, 2001, pp. 137-138).

9 Moltmann, J: Theology of Hope, SCM, London, 1967, p. 35

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) commemorated its 10th anniversary in 2012

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) is a World Council of Churches (WCC) initiative which was established in 2002 in response to a call made by the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, and Palestinian and Israeli NGOs. The mission of the EAPPI is to accompany Palestinians and Israelis in their nonviolent actions and concerted advocacy efforts to end the occupation.

EAPPI operates in the West Bank placing international volunteers (referred to as Ecumenical Accompaniers or EAs) at one of seven placements in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, South Hebron Hills, Tulkarm and Jayus, where they experience life under the occupation and offer a protective presence to vulnerable communities. In addition, EAs monitor and report human rights abuses and support Palestinians and Israelis in nonviolent resistance working together for peace. EAs undertake a three-month period of service in the West Bank, after which time they return to their home countries. There they campaign for a just and peaceful resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through an end to the occupation, respect for international law and implementation of UN resolutions.

The programme currently has its 46th international team working on the ground in Jerusalem and the West Bank. It has brought 1,062 volunteers from 25 countries to the West Bank over the past 10 years.