

Report on Study Tour to Israel/Palestine Spring 2025 with ICAHD

Mary Brown 22/4/25

ICAHD is The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and began in Israel in 1997, founded by Jeff Halper <https://icahd.org/>

The largest key
in the world!

Outside Aida
Refugee Camp.

One day maybe
all doors will be
open!



Travelling at this point in time was both revealing and alarming. Israel is scrutinising visitors in a way that it has not previously, using the electronic visa as an additional way to filter out travellers of whom they disapprove. Fear and Control are the key to maintaining the Occupation and the sense of both dominate life. The tour was so full and intense that it's impossible to capture everything here. We heard from a wide range of speakers and met ordinary people who are living in fear all the time. Nothing about the place and its appearance felt "normal" and the sense of danger for the Palestinians is ever present.

The world has changed in the Occupied Territories since 7th October (2023). We witnessed some of the effects over the past year and a half, namely an increase in disruption, imprisonments, expulsions, surveillance and lawlessness in the rural areas caused by settlers. Inevitably, there has also been a dramatic drop in international visitors to the region, which has resulted in high unemployment in the tourism and hospitality industry compounded by the ending of employment for West Bank Palestinians who previously worked in Israel. For the first time ever, some of the people we heard from feel they are facing an existential threat. There was a sense of weariness and resignation that the world knows what is happening and yet still no action is taken.

On a visit to the **Aida Refugee Camp** in Bethlehem, we were able to walk around the permanent structures which were built in the 1960s and where 7k people now live. It is next to the large Israeli military camp in Bethlehem and has the eight-metre-high cement separation wall situated next to it. The wall itself displays ever more graffiti about the

Occupation and tells tragic personal testimonies about the impact of this separation on ordinary people. The camp is under surveillance constantly and the IDF often raids the camp as it has in other areas of the West Bank. This is because Aida Refugee Camp is used for military training on raiding homes and because most resistance leaders have grown up in refugee camps. The Aida Youth Centre within the camp provides a safe and nurturing space for young people in the camp, particularly those who are under-achieving at school, providing mechanisms to deal with the trauma they face, including sport, arts, health and advocacy services. Despite this, the executive staff and board of the Youth Centre have been arbitrarily imprisoned and held without reason or explanation by the Israeli authorities. One of them described his experience of eight months of incarceration. Due to the torture he experienced, he thought he would die and said that he only survived by taking hope as his shield and with a strong determination to return home to his wife and baby son.

During our stay, the larger Deheisheh Refugee Camp, also in Bethlehem, had leaflets distributed by the Israeli authorities to its 19k residents. The leaflets followed actions against refugee camps further north in the West Bank where residents have been attacked and forced out.

"Residents of Deheisheh Camp, Be Alert!

As you have already seen, the camps in the northern West Bank have paid a heavy price due to terrorist and militant activities.

Wherever there is terrorism, life is damaged.

Security forces will use all available means against any attempt or activity of this kind.

The one who has been warned is now without excuse!"

Bedouin and the Negev Desert

We visited the Negev desert (within Israel) where the Bedouins have traditionally farmed for generations. Now the government policy is to concentrate the communities into as small an area as possible, taking their grazing lands. There are currently 35 villages that Israel has always failed to recognise, leaving them liable to demolition orders and without any services at all. The traditional life of the Bedouin has been altered by restrictions and few of them now keep animals. One recently demolished village we saw, Umm Al Hiram, used to have 2k villagers. It was finally demolished about 6 months ago after years of partial demolitions and the people forcibly moved into Hura. Hura is an Israeli-created town, rather like a reservation, where former villagers will be allowed to live and is designated to house 20k people together.

We saw the JNF(Jewish National Fund)-owned bulldozers still there and the only sign of life was a man guarding them. Between 30 – 40 Jewish families are already camping on a nearby hill waiting to move in. Unlike in the Bedouin communities, electricity and water resources are made available for Israeli Jews in this region; and we could see a water tank in the distance that serves only the Jewish settlements. The new town is set to house more than 20k and will be called Dror (Freedom). As our guide pointed out, they have the whole desert to build on, but the authorities, through the ideological Jews who claim the whole of the land for Israel, choose to erase the villages and cover any trace of the former Palestinian village.

Contrary to what the Israeli government says, the Bedouins are not trespassing on Israeli land, as we heard from **Adalah** (Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel www.adalah.org), but still the demolition orders are given. Recently, it has even been a

priority to demolish homes with children and old people in them because they are more likely to move away and find somewhere else to live.

Rural communities and the Jordan Valley

In the Jordan Valley we visited the **Jordan Valley Solidarity Campaign** where at present, international volunteers play a major role in providing a protective presence to defend local Palestinian herding communities from Israeli settler violence, putting themselves at significant personal risk to do so. They work in shifts to provide cover for the herdsman at night as it is then that settlers may come and steal or kill livestock. The settlers are less likely to attack internationals, but there is also the risk of collective punishments in store for communities if the local settlers realise that they have internationals helping them. To avoid getting too much bad publicity, the settlers in the Jordan Valley manage to “control” their violence, however their settlements are positioned next to the Palestinian communities to daily threaten and disrupt the lives of the Palestinian herdsman.

Rabbi Arik Ascherman of the Torat Tzedek-Torah of Justice has been witnessing and protecting local herding communities for over 29 years and reports that things have never been as bad as they are right now. Over the past year and a half, the settlers have become increasingly emboldened to act above the law, compounded by the election of Trump more recently. The local army will often take their orders from the settlers, and it can be difficult to distinguish who is who as settlers sometimes dress up as soldiers and arms have been freely distributed to settlers since 7/10. Rabbi Arik is finding fewer Israeli officials who “will do the right thing” and is feeling more isolated than ever before.

He told us that the policies of Israel and the actions of the fanatical religious settlers are dividing the Jewish communities that he speaks to in the USA. Growing numbers of younger Jews are opposing the Occupation and the situation is challenging traditional Jewish ways of thinking. He feels a sense of crisis for the Jews, that “we have become so extreme we are destroying ourselves”.

Tent of Nations <https://tentofnations.com>

This environmental farm is located between Bethlehem and Hebron and has been besieged for decades by encroaching settlements. It is the only Palestinian farm to be left standing on the top of a hill. Israeli settlers have a policy of claiming the hilltops to establish their settlements and thus covet Tent of Nations which is currently surrounded by five settlements. It is also in the rare position of possessing all their legal documents to show ownership. However, as the Israeli authorities have not accepted them, the Tent of Nations has been trapped in a legal battle to defend itself since 1991.

The Tent of Nations has built an international reputation as a peace-building and non-violent resistance community that welcomes many international visitors every year. It also runs programmes for Palestinians, and has run summer camps for children from the Deheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem.

Having visited this place in 2016, I found the contrast very dispiriting. It was very quiet when we visited and Daoud Nassar, the head of the family, seemed exhausted. As a deeply committed Christian, he feels let down by the lack of words and action from the Church and appealed to us to pursue the Church in the UK for action and support for the Palestinians. We could see containers placed on the other side of his fence very close to his property, which is a sign that settlers may be preparing to establish themselves.

Division in the community

I became more aware this time of the division that has been sown between Palestinian people by the system that Israel uses of fragmenting the Palestinian population. They experience different treatment and rights depending upon where they live in these five categories: Israeli Palestinians, those living in the West Bank, the diaspora (refugee camps) and those in occupied East Jerusalem and those in Gaza. This creates a situation where Palestinians are cut off from each other and makes it difficult to form any social conscience and it is impossible to assemble.

We heard from Mahmoud Muna at the **Educational Bookshop** that Palestinian students in East Jerusalem may choose to attend a university in Israel because of the ease of travel and to avoid checkpoints and delays. There is a sense of the Jews and Palestinians becoming “incorporated” but not integrated in Jerusalem, creating a situation of one state without a real sense of cohesion. He described it not as a melting pot, but more of a “mixed salad”.

Awad Abdelfattah, Founder of Balad Party and leader of **One Democratic State Campaign** talked to us about the political situation. Many Palestinians are in favour of a single state but don't want to speak up as going away from the Two State solution could lose European support and funding. The PA also falls into this group, fearing that it would lose international support if it abandoned the Two State idea. He feels that the PA needs reform and that Palestinians are suffering from a lack of vision.

Awad also told us that Palestinians are unable to show any solidarity with those who suffer under Israel's domination and all protest is shut down. He commented that Palestinian solidarity across the world has been greater than in it has been in Israel/Palestine and it has been moving and much appreciated, according to him. Again, we heard how Palestinians in Israel have been fired from their jobs for showing any sympathy on Social Media with Gaza and have been unable to openly share news of their families in Gaza.

There was also an echo of the words of the long incarcerated Nael Barghouti, who on his recent release said that Palestinians have a double burden: to liberate our land and liberate the Jews from Zionism. According to Awad, there are a few marginalised groups in Israel trying to do that. He also told us that Palestinians within Israel are being killed every day, due to organised crime, which the Police ignore. He describes this as an indirect war on Palestinians and a financially advantageous way of controlling the population (through extortion).

Much time was spent with **Jeff Halper of ICAHD**. We spent most of our first full day with him and then met with him again later during the tour programme. While on a bus tour, he illustrated the ongoing apartheid system that has been developing over decades. We saw in

East Jerusalem where illegal Jewish settlements will be connected by a flyover to enable Jewish settlers to drive around without touching Palestinian neighbourhoods at all, while Palestinians living in its path will not receive any improved services – part of the continued drive to make life intolerable and difficult to remain. Jeff helped us understand Israel's settler colonial agenda and that to achieve its goals, it includes the use of genocide. It happened in 1948 when the state of Israel was established, and it is happening again now. He said that the only true ally of the Palestinians is international civil society.

<https://icahd.org/2025/04/11/jeff-halpers-april-2025-update/>

MB

23.4.25