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House of freedom – at a terrible expense

By Hebron EAs, Photos by EA Silja Nordahl (4.12.08)



Wadi al-Hussein on fire.

Fire, smoke, shouting, shooting, fighting, rock throwing, tear gas, you name it. The Occupied House was evacuated on December 4th. Within less than an hour, the IDF physically and forcefully removed between 200–250 settlers from the disputed al-Rajabi house on the hill of Al-Ras. As we watched the news, suddenly the whole world talked about Hebron.

But what's with all the commotion lasting for several days? What the international media didn't pick up so quickly, was that Palestinian houses in every area around town, particularly in the Wadi al-Hussein valley between the House and the Kiryat Arba settlement, but also in the villages outside town and even throughout the entire West Bank, were attacked, rampaged or set on fire in retaliation to the forced evacuation of one single house. Of course, some of the Palestinians fought back.



Picking up the pieces in Al-'Uwewi's house.

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Onion against tear gas in Bab A-Zawiya.

An international observer said off the record that “this is the greatest setback of Hebron settlers throughout history.” Our Palestinian friends and contacts now call the Occupied House the House of Freedom. But to many families, that freedom came at a high cost.

For the EAs, the greatest challenge was watching our new friends suffer while all our efforts to help and accompany seemed futile. Some of us were in the Old Souk when settlers from the Avraham Avinu house rampaged their neighbour, the Al-'Uwewi family's house. For our own security, we had to leave in a hurry while the family and their friends fought the battle alone. That was difficult. Two nights later, settlers set fire to the upper floor of the house, completely burning one room. All we could do was document the damage the day after. Some of us stood on the rooftop of the Ja'abary's house at the far end of the hill facing the Wadi al-Hussein valley during the eviction on Thursday. We had to watch as two dozen settler men attacked the house of the Abu Sa'afen family, whom we had befriended two days earlier. Settlers were on their

*President's
spokesman
making
promises.*



roof, in their garden, trying to force their way through the front door. Suddenly we saw fire inside one of the windows.

We had noted their phone number, so we called them and let one of our local contacts talk to them in Arabic. The woman on the receiving end was trembling so much she could hardly speak. She said that they were only women and children and an elderly man in the house. A journalist nearby had been wounded in the head, she said.

Azzoun – a microcosm of the Occupation

By Jayyous EAs (7.12.08)

It seems that the villages of the West Bank are microcosms of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. However, they do not get the media and international attention that the ongoing humanitarian situation in Gaza, the settlement expansion in East Jerusalem or the settler violence of Hebron rightly receive.

Azzoun, a small town with 5,000 inhabitants, is one such village. It sits to the west of route 55 and is the main entrance point for the village of Jayyous and surrounding villages.

While visiting Azzoun last week, we were informed that the IDF had advised the Azzoun Municipality of their intention to build the Wall on route 55. We were given a copy of the map for the proposed route. The map does not include or make reference to any gate. The Wall will effectively cut off the access for approx 20,000 people living in Azzoun to the surrounding villages, strangling the economy of the area. The community was given five days to lodge a response, but with the pending Eid feast this effectively means that the community only has four days to respond.

On meeting with the Mayor this week he advised us that the community is planning activities to demonstrate their objection to the Wall.

We called all the people and organisations we could think of. But of course they already knew. There was not much anyone could do. Soldiers were at the scene – not doing much either. We all felt helpless. “We just have to hope for the best,” said one Israeli peace activist.

On Saturday we visited the Abu Sa'afan family and photographed the damage to their home – the broken windows and the burns. The same day, Rafiq Hussein, head of the President's Office in Ramallah, visited the area of the new Freedom House. He made statements and talked to the affected Palestinians, promising them that “as long as there remains one settler on the West Bank, there will not be peace.”

With the backdrop of Kiryat Arba, the oldest settlement on the West Bank (established in 1968, at present 7,500 inhabitants), the statement did not at all sound as encouraging as it was probably meant to.

This week we also received a number of calls from our contacts in Azzoun informing us of settler attacks. Some of these, at least, appeared to be backlashes from the eviction of the settlers from the House of Contention in Hebron. The most offensive of these attacks was the defacement of the town's mosque with graffiti.

In response to these recent events, we have increased our presence, monitoring and documenting the effects of the occupation in Azzoun and will continue to accompany the villagers in their resistance against the occupation.



Settlers defaced Azzoun's mosque with graffiti.

Protests and house demolitions in Silwan

By Jerusalem EAs (9.12.08)



Children joined the protest against the excavations and construction in Silwan. Photo: EA Helena Koumi.

Silwan is a densely populated and very poor Palestinian area in East Jerusalem, located close to the Old City, with a population of approximately 50 000. Settlers belonging to a group called Elad are increasingly moving in and harassing the population. The Israelis claim this area to be the City of David which has strong religious and historic value to them and several archaeological excavations are underway in order to prove this case. These excavations have been called “political archaeology” and the archaeologists are said to only look for remains that prove their case, while throwing away other valuable findings. Palestinians think that the excavations are causing structural damage to the houses and roads above, as well as the Al Aqsa mosque.

During November and December, there were several protests in Silwan against the recent road work. The local population feel that the Israelis want to re-route the road to make it more difficult

for Palestinians to access their homes.

The Jerusalem EAs were present during all protests. On the first day, a large group of kindergarten children joined the protest, filmed by several TV-teams. Numerous Israeli peace activists stood alongside the Palestinians of Silwan. A community activist says that the settlers are increasingly taking over the role of the police in the neighbourhood, blocking off the road leading down to Silwan. The goal of the protests – to hinder the construction work while awaiting a court hearing the following Sunday – was successfully achieved.

Although not providing an active presence, we felt that it was important to be there and show our support. We were also happy to see that the community calls us when something is going on. This must mean that they feel that they can rely on us to provide presence and show solidarity with them.

Several house demolitions have been undertaken in Silwan and the estimation is that 60% of the Palestinian houses have received demolition orders. During the first week of December, there were two house demolitions in Silwan. The Jerusalem team was present at a partial demolition that went on for almost a whole day. 21 family members were living in the house and three of them were displaced because of its partial demolition. The family was obviously very upset since they were in the process of receiving a permit for the improvements made on the house. The 83-year-old grandmother in the family was taken to hospital after being physically assaulted by the police during the demolition and one man in the family was arrested.

14-year old shot in the head in Hebron

By Hebron EAs (12.12.08)

On 12th December, 14-year old Yacoub Qasrawi was on his way home in Jabal al-Rahma when he was shot in the head by a bullet fired by an IDF soldier at 10–15 metres distance. Israeli media say the boy was throwing rocks at the soldiers. Eye witnesses confirm that some boys had been throwing stones, but that this happened some time before and that Yacoub was not among them.

– Yacoub did not know about the situation, says an eyewitness who owns a shop around the corner. He was on his way home when three soldiers told him he could not go the usual route as three other soldiers were standing further up the road. They

told him he must instead walk on the other side of the wall, crossing a field. When Yacoub reappeared from behind the other end of the wall to get back out on the road, one of the three other soldiers up the road shot him in the head. He fell to the ground, and the three soldiers who had told him where to go rushed to his aid. They bandaged his head and called the ICRC. One of them took the gun from the soldier who had fired. Yacoub was taken to intensive care and was held there for 1½ hour before being transferred to the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem. According to Israeli media, Yacoub’s condition is stable but critical. According to a local witness who has spoken to his family, he is “clinically dead.” The family has filed complaints against the IDF.

The new Huwwara checkpoint

By Yanoun EAs (15.12.08)

This week we felt it was important to monitor the new Huwwara checkpoint that opened on Monday. Due to Eid there have not been a lot of people, but we still wanted to be there and show our presence. We have been talking to soldiers, trying to find a place for us to stand as close to the turnstiles as possible. We have also talked to them about making both leaving and entering the checkpoint more accessible since the traffic, buses and *servises* are close to the entrance area.



Huwwara checkpoint. Photos: EA Tore Persson.

Ongoing army presence in Jayyous and Azzoun

By Jayyous EAs (22.12.08)

We have experienced a more frequent and consistent presence of the Israeli army in both Jayyous and Azzoun this week. On Monday the army arrived in Jayyous at approx 8.30a.m. We followed them from the east of the village to the north where they stopped at regular intervals vacating their vehicle and taking photographs of shops and property. The reason for this is unclear but many of the local people think that this has to do with gathering information about the village and villagers for when people are later arrested or detained.

Despite the fact that there was no demonstration in Jayyous this week, the army had prepared for one. At 12.30, we received a call from a family living

near the south gate requesting our presence as the army was at their house and denying the father access to his house. We made our way quickly to the south of the village and witnessed the father sitting on the side of the road beside his car. On trying to approach the home we were confronted by a soldier that advised us that we were in a closed military zone and must leave.

Azzoun of route 55 is no stranger to the presence of the army in the village. But as the horrors of the situation in Gaza unfolded, Azzoun became a focus of protests and therefore the site of a strong military presence. Sunday saw a day of closure in the town and people experienced difficulties entering and leaving Azzoun. Local contacts reported four injuries as a result of the army's use of rubber-coated metal bullets.

Festival at the checkpoint

By Hebron EAs (23.12.08)

On 23rd December, a delegation of 190 Spanish politicians, peace activists, media and tourists learned that they were not allowed to go to the Palestinian Cordoba School where they were to perform activities for children. The aim of the visit was to have a concert and art workshops for school children that are often traumatised and face settler violence. Since the visitors were denied access, like all internationals have been for the past two months, the school children came to meet them outside the checkpoint.

A folk band of Spanish musicians from Galicia started playing, people were clapping and waving their hands, and children were singing and dancing. It was a big moment for the children. "I am so happy. This is really special. I will write about it in my diary," said one of the school girls.



Dancing outside Tel Rumeida checkpoint. Photo: EA Gosia Juszcak.

In response, Israeli soldiers mobilised and gathered on top on the neighbouring building, pointing their M16s at us. But nobody really cared.

As planned, there was an art workshop for children, in which they drew their ideas of peace on a huge sheet of paper on the ground. It was quite an achievement: a real non-violent action that showed sincere and deep-from-the-heart solidarity with Palestinians and also attracted the media to cover the problem of movement restrictions in Hebron.

Khirbet at Tawayel – a village juggling with Areas A, B and C

By Yanoun EAs (23.12.08)

Following a report from UNOCHA and a request from UNRWA, we visited Khirbet at Tawayel on the 23rd December. We met the council representative of the village in the school of Khirbet at Tawayel, also known as Tall al Khashaba. This village is located 3 km from the town of Aqraba (Area A). The village of Khirbet at Tawayel is located in Area C and in an Israeli-declared closed military area, while the school is built in Area B. The school was built two years ago by the Palestinian Authority and funded by the World Bank.

History of the village

In the seventies, the village was declared a military area by the Israeli army. Two years later, an Israeli agricultural settlement appeared in the area, this land being one of the most fertile parts of Palestine as it lies on the edge of the Jordan valley. When the settlement had been established, the rest of the area was used for military training.

The villagers are shepherds and farmers so land is very important to them both for growing crops and for feeding their animals. The Israeli army has tried many ways to get the people of Khirbet at Tawayel to leave their village. As the council representative told us, "First the Israeli army started shooting the animals from the jeeps and tanks so the shepherds hid their flocks in the caves. Later they started to shoot them from aircraft. Once again they hid in their caves. Finally the army rounded up the flocks, took them into custody, and the villagers had to pay fines to get them back."

Christmas in Bethlehem

By Bethlehem EAs (24.12.2008)

It is Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. Boy Scouts are playing Christmas carols on bagpipes, Christmas lights are shining from private homes, shops and public buildings and tourists and pilgrims are gathering to be in the place where Jesus was born over two thousand years ago. The message brought to the shepherds of Bethlehem was good news of great joy for all people, a message of peace and hope. But there is little good news or peace or hope in and around Bethlehem. Last Sunday in the Bethlehem area, when people all over the world were singing about Bethlehem, the Israeli army confiscated fertile Palestinian farmland in one village, in another they bulldozed boundary walls

Stop-work orders

According to reports from UNOCHA on 9th January 2008, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) distributed 15 Stop Construction Orders affecting buildings in Khirbet at Tawayel. Sent prior to the issue of demolition orders, these orders apply to ten houses, two water cisterns, the mosque and a 5km stretch of the electricity grid built by international donors. The village has sought legal aid to cancel these orders but the case is still pending.

Encounter with the military

During what was meant to be a routine visit to the village, we were shocked to discover that the army had been active in the village the previous day. During the afternoon the army had come into the village and had begun shooting at night.

During our tour of the village, we noticed an armoured car at a distance and, switching on its headlights, it patrolled the village to make its presence felt and then came towards us. It stopped on the way and soldiers questioned two Palestinian villagers who were working on the land. We did not want the Palestinian farmers to be badly treated because of our presence so we got into the taxi and waited. The military vehicle blocked our way and a soldier got out, put on his gun and came over. He searched our driver and the council representative and then moved towards us. When asked who we were, we said we had been asked to visit the village by UNRWA. We intend to visit the village every week.



*Christmas decorations made by Palestinian children in Bethlehem.
Photo: EA Enid Gordon.*

built by farmers on their own land, in the town they arrested four people, while in another village settlers came and uprooted 150 healthy fruit trees with nothing being done to stop them or punish them. But Jesus was born in a land that was occupied to a people who suffered humiliation, poverty and injustice and he brought hope to his people. So we look for signs of hope amongst all the misery and despair that we see around us.

Beit Iba checkpoint – always changing

By Tulkarem EAs (29.12.08)



*Waiting at Beit Iba checkpoint.
Photo: EA Milena Aviram.*

Twice a week we monitor Beit Iba, a checkpoint (CP) leading from the north-east into Nablus. We stand there on Thursday afternoons and Sunday mornings, as the students come home for the weekend and go back to university for the week. Every time we arrive at the CP, we encounter a different situation. On 21st December, the humanitarian lane was moving very slowly, while the queue for men between ages 16 and 35 was short and moving quickly, but on most days it is the opposite. Sometimes whole busloads of people are let through the CP without being checked, while on other days every passenger has to step out of the bus to be checked one by one. Sometimes it happens that a very quiet day finishes with a sudden closure of the CP. Once we were surprised with a new CP being established on the way to Beit Iba, and rumours

Happy New Year?

By Bethlehem EAs (31.12.08)

New Years Eve in Bethlehem was wet and cold just like Christmas Eve but the atmosphere couldn't be more different. On Christmas Eve the town was so full of people wanting to worship in the different churches that it was impossible to move on foot or by car in anything other than a snail's pace. On New Years Eve the planned fireworks and public celebrations were cancelled and the restaurants and hotels were almost empty. Everyone was quiet and subdued and close to tears.

As soon as the Israeli Air Force started bombing Gaza, all the shops in Bethlehem closed as a sign of their sympathy and grief. The Christmas lights were officially turned off. Only the churches and mosques were full – of people praying for an end to the slaughter of innocent people, that those who had lost loved ones would be comforted and for a lasting and just peace.

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surfaced that Beit Iba was going to be closed and this new CP close to the settlement of Shave Shomeron would take its place.

The latest – and very problematic – development is that we are no longer allowed to stand inside the CP. A new brigade arrived at Beit Iba and in our first encounter, the commander told us that there are new orders for the whole Shomeron area. He showed us a booklet, dated 3rd December, with a paragraph indicating that organisations monitoring CPs are not allowed inside. Unfortunately it was all in Hebrew and he did not let us take pictures of it. Our inquiries with ICRC Nablus and Machsom Watch did not give us more information about our expulsion from the CP. The Humanitarian Hotline later told us that the commander did not want us standing there because we are disturbing the Palestinians.

Our next monitoring of Beit Iba CP on December 26th was no more successful. As it was raining, the same commander allowed us to stand under the roof, but at the very far end of the CP. Our work is being hindered enormously by this new development. We will try to stand as close as possible without provoking the commander, keep a polite manner to show him that we are not there to criticise the Israeli army, but to accompany Palestinian people, and intervene only if there is a problem.



*Vigil on Manger Square protesting against the war on Gaza.
Photo: EA Enid Gordon.*

There have been many demonstrations here against what is happening in Gaza, with members of the town council, Muslims and Christians, standing side by side in silent witness. Since the attack on Gaza, the Israeli soldiers have been more tense than previously. They have set up extra checkpoints, are taking much longer to check IDs and have been shooting more tear gas. All the Palestinians we have come across are shocked and upset while behaving calmly and with dignity and not with the anger the soldiers appear to be expecting.