

# Education under occupation

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) - August 2010



**For the pupils of the Cordoba School, obtaining an education is a daily struggle. Their situation reflects a raft of policies that are destroying education throughout the occupied territories.**

At 7.45 in the morning, children queue up to pass through an army checkpoint in central Hebron, under the watchful eyes of Israeli soldiers with assault rifles. If they are allowed through, the children then walk along Shuhada Street, once the bustling heart of Hebron's commercial district but now a ghost street of abandoned shops, their doors long ago welded closed under military orders.

As they approach the Cordoba School, close to the illegal Israeli settlement of Tel Rumeida, the children face the very real possibility that they will be verbally or physically abused by Israeli settlers, including other children (see picture, below).

The army, which has a legal duty to protect civilians in the territories it occupies, rarely does anything to intervene. Settlers have subjected the nearby school building to a campaign of window smashing, arson attacks and graffiti. Walls nearby are daubed with the slogan: "Gas the Arabs!"

Participants in EAPPI regularly accompany children to schools around Hebron to provide protection from this kind of intimidation and violence. But the Cordoba School is an acute example of how settler harassment and official Israeli policies disrupt education and traumatise children throughout the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt).

In the Gaza Strip, there is a severe lack of classrooms due to Israel's bombing raids and its refusal to allow building materials into the territory. This places education under severe strain. In addition, thousands of students suffer from the long-term effects of trauma due to recent Israeli attacks.

In Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem, thousands of Palestinian students are denied access to supposedly mandatory, free public education, says the Israeli human rights group Ir Amim. Around four thousand do not attend school at all. One reason is the shortfall of around 1,000 classrooms, due to systematic discrimination by the municipal authorities, which rights groups say give preferential funding to Jewish areas of the city.



Pupils at the Cordoba School in Hebron face regular harassment by Israeli settlers. (Photo: EAPPI).



The checkpoint near Cordoba School. (Photo: EAPPI).

**“The Occupying Power shall... facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children..”**

*Article 50, 4th Geneva Convention, 1949.*

Meanwhile, many pupils in the West Bank face a daily obstacle course of roadblocks and checkpoints, and some are subject to violence and harassment by settlers and the army.

Throughout the oPt, thousands of children suffer from the long-term effects of trauma associated with military incursions, home demolitions and other policies of the occupation.

“Children (in the oPt) show signs of depression, anxiety and reduced academic achievement,” reported Unicef recently. But few teachers are trained to identify, let alone treat, psychological problems.

Universal primary education is an essential condition for development and poverty reduction. Education gives hope for better economic opportunities and makes young people less susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups.

Israel officials frequently state that the government is committed to strong economic development in the West Bank, but the policies of the occupying authorities are strongly at variance with this claim.

Israel should fulfil its obligations under international law by ensuring that all Palestinian children under its jurisdiction can safely access quality education without being prevented by the daily hardships of movement restrictions or the fear of harassment and violence.

## The school run can be stressful for children and parents around the world, but spare a thought for the children of An Nu'man, a small village between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

For a start, there is no transport between their homes and the school in the village of Al Khas, as the Israeli army does not allow buses to enter An Nu'man. The walk to school takes about an hour each way.

But far the bigger challenge is crossing the checkpoint at the edge of their village. Children regularly report being harassed there. One 12-year-old from the village, says a soldier at the checkpoint once pointed his gun at her, insulted her with “dirty words” and told her he was going to shoot her.

Her experience is one among many reports of harassment in An Nu'man. A boy aged 16, who did not want to be named for fear of future harassment, told EAPPI he was made to take off all his clothes and stand naked in a room inside the checkpoint. Girls from the village were brought in while he stood there. Some children report being kept in a darkened room at the checkpoint in an apparent effort to scare them.

The harassment is not limited to children; other residents report similar experiences. But the fear of the journey makes going to school a potentially terrifying experience. The head of the school says that children from An Nu'man now wait for each other after school so they can go home in a group, for protection.

### No place like school

While many Palestinian children have a tough time reaching school, others have no school to attend at all. In January 2010, the Israeli authorities demolished 16 homes and a school in the tiny Palestinian village of Khirbet Tana. The village is in Area C, the parts of the West Bank where Israel directly controls all civic planning and prohibits virtually all Palestinian building.

Seventeen pupils, aged 6-10, lost their school building and were forced to complete the semester in a makeshift tent. Later they moved to school in the larger village of Beit Furik, another displacement. The experience “affected them a lot,” says a local Palestinian official.



A picture by Hala, a Palestinian schoolgirl from a village that has suffered years of harassment by armed Israeli settlers. (Photo: EAPPI).

A group of participants in EAPPI recently visited the Tyre School, an Italian-designed facility also in Area C. The architects used tyres, mud and zinc to erect the structure in just 20 days.

Only when it was complete did the settlers and the authorities notice the new building and protested against it in the Israeli courts. But the court ruled that the building cannot be demolished until an alternative school is built for the children.

This is a rare success, however. In East Jerusalem, the lack of schools is particularly acute - and unnecessary. Rights group Ir Amim says that although all children who are residents of East Jerusalem are entitled by Israeli law to free public education, thousands do not receive it.

“One of the main problems is the shortage of over 1,000 classrooms,” says the group’s website, noting that the Israeli High Court has ordered the authorities to remedy the situation.

“Yet despite repeated government promises to the Court to resolve this shortage, hundreds of classrooms still have not been built, and the classroom shortage has steadily worsened,” says the group (Source: [www.ir-amim.org.il/eng](http://www.ir-amim.org.il/eng)).

For the children of Gaza, the situation is immeasurably bleaker. A shortage of basic goods, including building materials, combined with acute overcrowding and overwhelming trauma amongst children, has brought the education system close to collapse.

For its own security (see right) and the future of the region, Israel must ensure that Palestinian children are allowed freely access high quality education, without fear of harassment or violence.

## What you can do...

### Support the Right to Education Campaign

Consider supporting this campaign by Birzeit University to support the right of Palestinians to education.

Website: <http://right2edu.birzeit.edu/>

## Education, Development and Conflict

**Education is essential for development. The UN’s Millenium Development Goals set universal primary education as a top priority, and experts see it as particularly crucial in societies emerging from violent conflicts. Indeed, access to quality education is often seen in terms of security:**

**“Formal and non-formal education provides young people with a sense of normalcy and hope for the future, promotes well-being and cognitive development and reduces the risk that they will engage in dangerous activities,” says an October 2010 report by the UN Population Fund ([www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)).**

**Moreover, education is a basic human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements. The Fourth Geneva Convention, which lays out internationally agreed rules for the conduct of occupying powers, demands that “the Occupying Power shall... facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children.” (Article 50).**