

What can we say?

First-hand reflections from the Middle East

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By the time most of you see this, you will have already read dozens of disturbing and horrifying accounts from international peace activists, solidarity workers, and others who have recently traveled to Palestine to participate in, observe, and learn about the situation that has grabbed the world's attention for the past few months. That fact troubled me while sitting down to write. What more could I say about my journey that would interest anyone? My hope is that I can convey my experience in such a way that does not simply echo what others have already said or written, and that you don't glance at this article with indifference ("not another article about the Middle East crisis.")

Each account is significant; not only in the information it conveys, but also in the cathartic effect the writing or telling of it has on those who were there to witness it. We all have different reasons for going, but the common theme was that we were there to see for ourselves and to return to tell others the truth about what we saw. My biggest fear right now is that we will become immune to the stories and images to which we are constantly exposed. We'll suffer from information overload, become even more resentful of the media's focus and bias at the expense of many other important struggles and injustices in the world, and that we will not take seriously enough the grave human rights abuses occurring right now in the Middle East.

I have to believe that this is a situation we can rectify, in our lifetimes. The Israeli regime has often been compared with that of South Africa's apartheid. It took many years of activism, and international pressure, but if apartheid in South Africa was defeated, we can overcome the cultural and religious supremacists in the Middle East as well.

I was very intrigued when first hearing about the efforts of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), activists from many countries, including Americans and Israelis who put their own bodies on the front lines to protect Palestinians. I deeply admire the work they do, and although I can see myself doing such work, I didn't want my first visit to the Middle East to be that kind of trip. I felt I had a lot to learn and wanted a broader introduction to the country, the people, and the culture than such a journey could offer. My journey in April was led by two people from Ann Arbor, Michigan, Alan Haber and Odile Hugonot-Haber, who have traveled to the Middle East each spring for the past ten years as part of the Megiddo Peace Project (www.umich.edu/~megiddo/). Because they are trusted friends, dedicated activists, and visionaries, I felt I would get a well-rounded tour. They know many peace activists in Israel and are familiar with the culture and geography of the land.

The Peace Table

The underlying purpose of our trip was to bring the Peace Table to the region. The four-foot diameter, cherry wood table was crafted by Haber in 1976 and is described in the Megiddo website as "beautiful by all accounts, receptive to all outstanding questions, aesthetically transforming the square of earth to the circle of heaven, with

nothing lost, built with the vision of a peace meeting to end all wars.” It was shipped to Israel ahead of us and was waiting for us when we arrived.

Haber envisions his work as embodying the principle of “Art for Peace.” He sees it as a negotiating table to bring to it those who will not budge. However, the recent Israeli invasion into the West Bank derailed much of the idealism inherent in the table.

This same table served at the opening session of the 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace, the world’s largest ever peace meeting. Nobel Peace prize winners Desmond Tutu, Rigoberta Menchu, and Jose Ramos Horta sat around Haber’s creation at a session moderated by David Andrews, Ireland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. They talked of what they had learned in their peace efforts in South Africa, Guatemala, and East Timor. The table also served in the room where different meetings discussed small arms dealing, child soldiers, nuclear weapons, the war in the Sudan, and two sessions on Jerusalem. This table is legendary. Although the idea to bring the table to the Middle East had been alive for decades, it was the first time it had been brought there.

Because I’m not an artist, and more secular than spiritual, I felt only peripherally invested in this “art for peace” project. Since then, however, I’ve discovered the value in the creative ideals represented by the table. People cope with the trauma and pain of injustice in many ways, and the more constructive and imaginative approaches there are, the better. My main objective in the Middle East was to learn and witness, to meet and talk with people, to participate in actions and demonstrations, and to find some tiny bit of humanity in a region that has been fractured and torn by war since well before my birth. Because of the intense amount of activity throughout my stay, I constantly absorbed information and a continuous sensation of sights, sounds, and smells from the different cultures with which I came in contact. The intense amount of activity I participated in during a relatively short amount of time created an ultimately moving experience.

A diverse international peace movement

My group met with many people working for peace in Israel and Palestine. The peace movement there is broad and-varied, and each group, if not each person, has his or her own ideas and hopes for a just solution to the conflict.

Because my guides were familiar with the movement and those involved in it, I was able to meet Jessica Montell, Executive Director of B’Tselem (<http://www.btselem.org/>), the largest human rights organization in Israel; Jeff Halper, Coordinator of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (<http://www.icand.org/eng/>); Elias Jabbour, Director of The House of Hope International Peace Center (<http://www.hohpekecenter.org/>); Lily Traubmann, Political Coordinator of Bat Shalom (<http://www.batshalom.org/>); Gila Svirsky, coordinator of the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace (<http://www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org/>); Ibrahim El-Hawa, who works with the Jahalin Bedouins, as well as people working at the Alternative Information Center (<http://www.alternativenews.org/>), and many other activists from various peace groups who are, in creative ways, resisting Israel’s war.

Every one of these people took the time to talk with us about the situation and the work they are doing. I felt privileged to have such entree, although I also had the sense anyone would have received the same treatment. Most people there, both Palestinians and Israelis, are very receptive to outside involvement in helping to solve the crisis, because they realize they cannot solve it by themselves. They are all but paralyzed by fear and frustration.

We met dozens of peace activists from France, Italy, England, Holland, Scotland, Canada, Turkey, and the US, and participated in many peace demonstrations, rallies, and meetings, in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Tel Aviv, allowing me broad exposure to the various activities and activists. We brought the Peace Table to a demonstration outside Ariel Sharon’s house, where it was well received by the mostly liberal Israeli crowd, but at Tel Megiddo National Park, the anticipated biblical site of Armageddon, it was perceived by park officials as being “too political” and we were not allowed to place it there.

Journey to Jenin

On April 23, we joined a delegation of about twenty internationals and Palestinians, who were invited to tour Jenin in the West Bank following the withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Our group included Kathy Kelly, cofounder of Voices in the Wilderness; Bill Thomson, an Ann Arbor psychologist and professor who trains Palestinian mental health care workers in trauma treatment skills; Dr. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, professor of Social Work and Criminology at the Faculty of Law, Hebrew University, Jerusalem; Sama Aweidah, Director of the Women's Studies Center in Jerusalem; Lloyd Quinan, Member of the Scottish Parliament, and several peace activists like ourselves.

The Jenin camp, created in 1953, was one of the many areas that came under IDF attack in late March. During the battle for Jenin, at least 23 Israeli soldiers were killed as well as an unknown number of Palestinians. (Recent reports indicate that perhaps double that number of IDF soldiers perished, but it is unconfirmed as of this writing.) Although the army pulled out of Jenin, the Israeli government refused to allow rescue workers, medical aid, reporters, or fact-finding teams into the camp. Those who enter the camp do so through illegal means, but we decided to risk the journey.

Getting there was not easy. We chartered a tour bus to drive us from Jerusalem to an Arab village about fifteen kilometers from Jenin. We arrived at a point where we had to disembark and walk about two kilometers down a dirt road that was obstructed so cars couldn't use it. When we reached the end of that road we were in another Arab village, and walked a little farther where taxicabs were waiting to drive us into Jenin. Our drivers knew how to avoid the checkpoints, and we were dropped off just inside the refugee camp, where several white-vested Union of Palestinian Medical Aid Relief Committee volunteers from Jenin met us.

There were crowds of Palestinians on the street, and immediately I could see fire damage to buildings around us. There was a noticeable pall over the people milling about, as they wandered about without purpose, stunned looks on their faces.

A somber young boy of about 12 approached me. He tried to speak, and although it became clear at once that we couldn't communicate with each other, I understood that he was suffering a terrible loss. As we were led further into the camp, the damage became worse. At the end of the first street, the sight of the rubble and demolished houses was a shock to all of us. Most accounts describe it as being very similar to the damage of an earthquake; the difference is that after an earthquake there are rescue workers and other support at hand. Here, there was nothing.

A couple of UN cars were parked outside the camp, but no rescue work or even fact-finding was being done. The sewer system had been damaged, and I saw local men working to repair it. We were told Red Cross workers were allowed to deliver water each day, but we did not see any while we were there. One of our guides explained some of the IDF abuses witnessed against the residents of the camp. He said that men and women were ordered to undress in front of each other, and when two old men refused, they were shot. We were led into a house that was damaged from the inside, riddled with bullet holes and broken glass everywhere.

This was typical of many private homes we saw. Inside Jenin Hospital, the Director, Dr. Mohammed Abu-Ghali, spoke to us for about 45 minutes. He estimated at least 300 to 400 people died (while the wounded numbered only 102), but B'Tselem's Jessica Montell later disputed these figures. There is still no official death count. Many more injured were allowed to die because the soldiers would not let anyone provide medical treatment for them. One of our guides told us that some of the wounded were run over several times (intentionally) by Israeli tanks, leaving only small pieces of skin and bones.

Then, we were taken to see a young boy of about 10 in the hospital who was severely wounded. He had lost his arm, both legs were broken, and he was blinded. He was on a respirator. He was like a wounded animal, and I didn't think he was going to make it. His father was there, and when he began to speak to us, he broke down and cried.

He said, "My son lost his arm, o I lost my arm,. my son lost his eyes, so I lost my eyes; it would be better for him if he died." It was so tragic; my words cannot describe it. We heard later on, after arriving back in Jerusalem, that the boy died that evening.

Walking through the camp again, the young children seemed to be in good spirits, undoubtedly excited by the international visitors, but it was plain to anyone that the older children and adults were in a state of shock and

despair. They do not understand why this has been allowed to happen to them, and what can you say? The official Israeli explanations are not satisfactory; they do not convince any of us that this action was justified.

We walked back through the camp to the place where our taxis were waiting, but before making the three-hour trip back we were invited to eat by the medical aid relief volunteers who had led us through the camp. They made lunch for us, which included hommous, fresh pita bread, falafel, and mint tea.

This is the Arab way. You do not get invited without getting fed. It was remarkable that these people who have nothing found a way to welcome us as if we were their family. We ate and then got back into our taxis for the journey home.

On the obstructed dirt road back to the bus there were some Palestinians trying to take clothing and blankets to the people in Jenin. Israeli soldiers arrived and started shooting at them, so they dropped their relief supplies and ran away. Since they couldn't get to where a car could meet them, we helped bring the clothes down the road. The soldiers wouldn't shoot at us, but they did try to stop us. They began yelling, "No pictures!" so I put down my video camera and turned on a hidden audio disk recorder that was in my pocket.

There was a heated confrontation between two members from our group and two of the soldiers, one in English and the other in Hebrew, which lasted for about 20 minutes. Meanwhile, the rest of the group took advantage of the diversion to help deliver the clothes. We were hassled by the soldiers for another half hour, by now surrounded by about ten IDF soldiers, having to show our passports, have our backpacks searched, and told we were using an "illegal" road. They were angry about having to let us go, but there wasn't much they could do to us. We were finally allowed to board the bus and drove back to Jerusalem, arriving by 10 p.m., physically exhausted and emotionally drained. That's how I spent my 41st birthday.

Israeli anarchists and Palestinian statehood

At a large demonstration in Tel Aviv on April 27, there was a contingent of people waving black flags. Later on, I spotted a black flag with a circle-A, and approached the young man holding it. I asked him about the other black flags, and he replied that the plain black flag symbolizes solidarity with the refuseniks, Israeli soldiers who refuse to fight in the Occupied Territories. I wondered whether anarchists in Israel support the formation of a Palestinian state. He said he couldn't speak for all anarchists in Israel, but that personally, he thinks it is needed in the short run as a transitional phase, but that eventually even the state of Israel should be eliminated, because by its nature, it is a racist state. This presents an ideological predicament for anarchists.

How do we reconcile our solidarity with the people of Palestine when we don't support the creation of another nation-state? If the Palestinians are demanding their own state, does that mean we should support them? Like the many other struggles for self-determination, anarchists may find they are at odds with the rest of the peace movement over this issue. But to me, that issue is purely ideological when juxtaposed with the current issue of equality and human rights for which the Palestinians are struggling every moment of every day. Even though the desired result is not the same, we should support the cries for justice. Perhaps one day, more people will realize, as many Jews in Israel are now learning, that having your own state does not protect you.

To put the Israeli anarchist movement in perspective, an older radical I met estimated the number of anarchists in all of Israel to be about 200, "but about 170 of them are lifestyle anarchists," he added.

I would be remiss if I did not point out the psychological effects of the suicide bombers. All Israelis face the randomness of the attacks upon both working and middle class people. Most Israelis, even the lefties, anarchists, and peace activists, have had close calls or lost someone they know to a suicide bomber attack. But many see the withdrawal of Israel from the Occupied Territories as the critical first step to the security of Israeli people.

Jeff Halper, an activist against housing demolitions, says that the role of Israeli peace activists is "helplessness in the face of overwhelming force and callousness, yet faith that [you]...will generate the international pressures necessary to end the occupation once and for all." Elias Jabbour, from the House of Hope, is adamant that we must not be silent about the atrocities going on in the Occupied Territories, that "someone will eventually hear us." Those are appeals I cannot ignore.

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