

# Visit to 'Western Villages' Palestine

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*Tom Kay reports on life under occupation in rural Palestine.*

Most foreigners in the Occupied Territories look at, if not contribute to, an email network which alerts them to upcoming events. In May 2002 I received an email about an action to save the villages west of Ramallah, cut off from the rest of Palestine by IDF and roadblocks. The email came from International Checkpoint Watch, which organises a fairly systematic checkpoints watch, noting of the behaviour of the IDF towards Palestinians in the hope that it might moderate their behaviour. Observers work in pairs and generally do a two-hour stint. I last did it in February on a horribly cold evening and then promptly went down with pneumonia. The email told us that the Rapprochement Centre and the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) had organised for an international delegation to visit Deir Ibzi'a and other villages in the region, and that we would meet at 10 am, on Sunday 2 June at Ain Ariq roadblock. They had also informed the media, so that they could cover the event and draw international and local attention to the plight of the villages which had been under siege since 20 February.

Three of us met on Saturday 1 June, and got going on the road to Deir Ibzi'a at 11.00am. It was a barely ten minute drive through the mountains, going due west towards the Green Line. Just after the village of Ain Arik, we got out on the road and started up the mountain to the north. Below us and 1 kilometre

further along the road we could see the roadblock and checkpoint. For the first 20 minutes we climbed from terrace to terrace, while moving west along the terraces, parallel to the road but out of sight of it. There were a few people scrambling up the mountain a few hundred metres behind us. Although there is no trail, there are dozens of ways up. Tel Aviv is clearly visible and the sea shimmers in the background. Ahead, we saw three IDF men on a terrace above us and to the west, cutting across to intercept us. Under an olive tree, we saw that they had already stopped a number of villagers, an old woman, young men, a mother and daughter. The IDF quizzed us and let us go on. We caught up with a strong-legged old woman after a few minutes. She told us that when the little girl had started crying, a soldier had turned his gun on her and told the mother to make her shut up. They wanted to catch us and the others coming up the mountain, and the crying girl would have been a warning. The old woman told us that a week ago they shot her cousin, who was carrying her two-year-old, through the hip.

**A**t the top, the rocky outcrops levelled out and then gradually descended. Another 10 minutes and we were at the first houses at the top of the village. These were new, and most were still under construction. Our host, a Palestinian who had lived in Hamburg for 22 years, lived in the first house, a block of 4 flats on two floors, with his German wife. Their teenage daughters have been moved into Ramallah so they can continue in school. The journey up and down the mountain twice a day is a killer, and very uncertain. The soldiers make up the rules day by day, sometimes turning people back, sometimes making them stand for hours, sometimes letting them go. A third daughter of eleven, very short-sighted, and two little ones of four and five, completed the family. Two of the flats are finished. Work on the others has stopped. Below the flats at the ground level, our host showed us a large room with 30 industrial sewing machines. He had tried to start a local industry, but it failed because of cheap imports, transport costs and Israeli taxes.

Sitting having tea on the terrace, we watched the IDF 100 metres away, intercepting people on the rocks. With others, I went onto the roof to get a better photo; two soldiers came over to the house and demanded to know who was on the roof. Even watching their actions is some sort of a crime. As foreigners, they can do little to us; this underlines the reason why they do not welcome our presence.

Later we visited a young man of 19, shot as he tried to bypass the soldiers. His arm had been shattered by what the hospital described as a dum dum bullet. The soldier asked why the boy had run away; the reply that he was afraid elicited the response: 'I don't understand his psychology'. Since February, seven people from the village have been shot: six on the mountain and one in the village

On our walkabout, we went into the now deserted and derelict old village. Olive press machines in vaulted spaces; beautiful stone relieving arches. Compressed views down into shaded alleyways and tunnels; very special, even for the Eastern Mediterranean. After 1967, the village was gradually rebuilt; at first single rooms, then single floors, with second floors added over the years. Unfortunately, as elsewhere, much has been lost, not least the ability to move about in the shade.

We are in a mountainous area containing 30 villages with 70,000 people. Deir Ibbi'a is one of the largest, with 1600 people. There are also half a dozen Israeli settlements, very easily recognised, with their orderly orange pitched roofs, strung out along the contours and served by specially built roads for their use only. Looking out over the mountains, these roads are easy to spot as they are the only ones with cars on them. All other roads into this region have been blocked to the outside world since 20 February. Within the area, villages have been cut off from one another in groups of 3 or 4 by additional roadblocks and checkpoints. No Palestinian can walk through the manned roadblocks, so that the mountains are laced with routes such as the one we used. The army is spread out through the whole area.

**A** spring supplies the village; its source is on a mountain outside the village. The settlers have taken to using it as a swimming hole. They come armed and the villagers dare not curtail their misuse of it. Recently, Israel has started to build a settlers' road which, when completed, will cut off the village from the water source.

For the first week after 20 February, there was a 100% curfew. All the houses were searched - the searches continue intermittently - one man said his had been searched ten times. Our host said that there have never been weapons in the village, nor are there any 'activists'. None of the factions have claimed to have sent a bomber from here, nor has Israel claimed that any were sent.

The truckers from Ramallah used to do a back to back delivery from/to this region (unload; manhandle over the roadblock; reload). But many of the drivers

have given up because capricious decisions by the IDF at the checkpoint meant that they never knew whether the goods would be allowed through or not. Little comes from Ramallah, the climb being too ferocious. Even so, I watched a woman, with a heavy head bundle, clambering up the rocks. The local shops are supplied from Israel, across the Green Line 12 kilometres away, mostly from Israeli Arabs. All goods are taxed by the soldiers as they come in. To some villages this means two, or even three, back to back loadings and unloadings across roadblocks. The price of everything goes up or the village shopkeepers become even poorer. On our walkabout, the few shops looked poor indeed. Deir Ibbzi'a is one of the most easterly villages and suppliers try to sell on their way through the other villages. Sometimes this means that the trucks are empty before they get to Deir Ibbzi'a. Because of this, in one village a product will be relatively cheap. Two villages down the line, it will be expensive. I watched a donkey climbing, heavily loaded with onions. Donkeys are sometimes turned back down the mountain.

After 1993, the villagers either trooped daily across the Green Line to labouring jobs in Israel, or became building workers in the Settlements. Many of them, including professionals such as a civil engineer I spoke to, did this because the pay, as manual workers, was so much better than the professional wages here. When the Intifada started, all this stopped. The rate of unemployment has shot up. 10 per cent of the villagers work directly or indirectly for the PA (Palestine Authority). Since 20 February the PA has tried to help by employing an additional 10 people per village for 15 days.

**T**he local schools are in a desperate state. Teachers, who used to commute by car in 10 minutes between village schools to give lessons, could no longer go with any certainty outside their own village. Local teenagers have either stopped going to school (in Ramallah) or take between one and four hours to get there instead of 15 minutes, assuming they get there at all. Last Tuesday, the army came into the primary school yard following three 'strangers' (not from this village) who came into the yard for a drink of water. The IDF arrested them and then closed the school. Asked why the tear gas, one of the soldiers joked, 'we are afraid of the children'. Perhaps one day they will have reason to be so, having virtually ensured another generation of resistance fighters.

Services are cut regularly; in one case for two weeks (telephone). Over the

last decade, cheap agro-industry food from Israel has wiped out the local terraced farms. Now food is expensive. Until recently, there was a co-operative chicken farm, now defunct because of the high cost of chicken feed coming from Israel. Chicken, which was the cheapest meat, is now affordable only by the wealthier villagers. Perhaps the closures here will bring the farming back.

**N**either Fatah nor Hamas operate organisationally here; although there are a few Fatah supporters, none are activists. Since 1993 there have been no elections, the village Councils having been appointed by Abu Amar (Arafat). In the last two months the village Council has been trying to reorganise to ensure reasonable distribution of goods available.

A month ago, this region, which had been 'Area B', was declared a military zone for six months. The economic result is clearly devastating. APCs come through the villages by night and day. Even the kids know better than to throw stones. These villages are out of the public eye and the villagers' experience has shown that, without the press looking on, the consequences would be quite nasty enough, even if not deadly. Few dare to walk outside their homes after dark. Until the military zone was declared, villagers could use their cars within the village. Now, at night, the IDF regularly slash the tyres of the few cars left on the streets, including, most recently, the electricity line repair truck. The only vehicles still out and about during the day are farm vehicles and a few trucks. DK, who lives on the edge of the village, was instructed not to move his car, as his house lies outside the IDF's declared village boundary. The routes from the mountain into the village pass his house. The IDF threatened to blow up the petrol station unless it closed. It closed.

A number of stories from villagers or DK, in no particular order. Many of the stories are entirely consistent. A few do need checking.

- ◆ Richard, a Canadian volunteer, tried to bring in needed medicine from Medical Relief for Palestine. The PA told him they had a clinic in the village, which is true, and that the PA would get their own supplies in. That was ten days ago. Nothing has yet got through the checkpoint.
- ◆ A sick villager tried twice to get to Ramallah on the road, and was turned back twice. She died on the road.
- ◆ A villager was held for 7 hours on the mountain and then told to go back.

- ◆ A teenage girl tried to cross the valley and was shot. She said she did not hear the IDF shouts; they claimed she had tried to avoid them.
- ◆ In answer to a woman's complaints, an Israeli soldier replied, 'Did you not hear that we are closing you in? If you want bread, you must bake it.'

As we walked through the village, I saw many iron ovens resuscitated in the courtyards. I took a photo of one through the gateway and a little boy rushed after us with a wonderful 50cm round of hot bread. It fed four of us as we walked. Very like a huge chapati. We visited the house of a middle-aged man who was lying on the sofa with a broken leg. He fell on the mountain. His mother, probably in her late 70s and very overweight, was worried. She said, 'It takes four people to carry me. What will happen if I have to go to hospital?' We visited Noura, aged 7. A beautiful little girl. She was found to have diabetes four years ago. The village clinic had the equipment for testing and the injections and she stabilised. Now the father is unemployed and cannot afford what is required. The girl is now epileptic. Every half minute or so she does a slow blink. The PA does not or cannot supply insulin and other medicines to the villages.

**O**n our way back to DK's house, we skirted the village and walked along the mountain road towards the checkpoint. Coming around a bend at the point where one would normally leave the road and get into the olive groves, we saw a tank on the road in front of us. Not unusual. Suddenly it opened fire with its heavy machine gun. We ran for cover behind the trees, until we saw that they were firing tracers into the trees across the valley into the side of the next mountain. It was dusk and anyone outside the village in the olive groves seemed to be fair game. The IDF should know that, having forced people off the roads between villages, they are likely to be shooting at people trying to get home. Back in the village, the armoured jeeps and APCs are racing around making a terrific noise on the hills. The villagers may be able to sleep through it, but I found it impossible.

Marylene arrived. An impressive weather-beaten German woman in her 70s. During the evening, many phone calls were made to find out if sufficient Internationals would be arriving tomorrow to front a demonstration. Without sufficient of us as witnesses, the villagers would not think of confronting the IDF at the checkpoint.

## **Bad news**

We learned that eight of the sixteen internationals who had been in Balata Refugee camp have been arrested and that the rest are staying to support them. (The story of what happened in the camp is on the Gush Shalom site on the Net.) The Rapprochement Group of 13 people are still in Beit Sahour near Bethlehem and, unless the closure is lifted, they won't be able to get to the village. Sourda, where a number were coming from, is still closed. We also learned that the students sitting in the road today at the Sourda checkpoint were shovelled up by a road builder's bulldozer. A number were injured.

We will meet the villagers in the morning to discuss what might happen. It does not look hopeful.

We got up at 7.30 next day - Sunday. Between 8.00 and 11.00 our numbers grew: two Canadian Paramedic students, another Canadian, whom I had met before through Checkpoint Watch, and two Palestinian-American young women. All had got through Souda very early that morning. Two Germans with a German television crew of two also turned up. We went down to meet another lot that had arrived in the village below on our way to the village meeting. They were sixteen Americans from the Christian Peace Team (CPT) based in Hebron. On our way to the mosque courtyard, we gathered up many dozen children. The mosque courtyard was like a summer party with about 150 milling about, chatting. An IDF APC arrived, rumbled around us and then left, no doubt to report something was happening.

There was no formal discussion but after an hour we moved off through the village, with more villagers joining us as we went. Efforts to chase away the children were only partly successful. 'Father Bob' of CPT, very experienced in non-violent action, took charge, and we proceeded slowly towards the roadblock. Three soldiers blocked the road about 100 metres from the roadblock and behind them an armoured jeep. By then there must have been 250 people. We sat down (I scooted around taking photos). In the first rows were the Internationals, then the male villagers and at the back on a mound, the women. Various speeches were made by the villagers and us, in Arabic and English. After half an hour, the IDF realised that there would be no stones thrown, let alone an assault. Some of us circled the jeep and talked to the soldiers and their commander, who never left the jeep. Whatever we said, the reply was polite and standard: 'I cannot discuss this with you'. We stayed about an hour and a half.

Will anything concrete have been gained by this show of solidarity? The IDF will have realised that information about this operation in the mountains is now in the public domain. In fact the siege of the villages was lifted about a week after we visited - less to do with the internationals' intervention than Amira Hass's article published in the Israeli daily *Haaretz* about it.

**A**nd the reason for this IDF operation? On 19 February, the Ain Ariq checkpoint was attacked by a single sniper with a rifle, sitting on the mountain. He killed, one after the other, six soldiers at the checkpoint. The sniper was not caught. From the Palestinians' point of view this was the most successful operation of recent months. Sharon's immediate response was a helicopter-launched rocket attack on Arafat's headquarters, known as the Mukahta, at 5.00am on 20 February. The siege of the Western Villages started later the same day and, I assume, was his long-term punishment.

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