

Kate Crockford

During the summer of 2003 I traveled to the West Bank city of Nablus to volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). The ISM is a grassroots international movement based in the Occupied Territories---the West Bank and Gaza strip---of Palestine. The movement's members are diverse; we come from over 20 countries, subscribe to myriad religions (if any at all) and have differing political opinions on issues ranging from the fundamental principles of Zionism to a rightful and just settlement of the violence today. The ISM's mission statement, to serve as a Palestinian-led, non-violent movement to end the illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip, is the only tie that binds these diverse individuals in their quest for justice in Israel/Palestine. Non-violence, in word and in action, as a pragmatic and moral tool toward self-determination, is the foundation and guiding principal of the ISM.

Activists who travel to the territories to work with ISM are expected to abide by a few, unquestionable rules. Among these are the commitments to non-violence, consensus based decision-making, and abstinence from sex, alcohol and drugs while participating under the banner of the ISM. Activists, upon entering Jerusalem, are given directions to the proper training facility and then take part in the mandatory training process. The two-day training involves language lessons, cultural sensitivity training, detailed descriptions of actions, explanations of how to write press releases and talk to media, and, most importantly, detailed discussions of consensus-based decision-making processes and the acting out of possible real-life situations in direct actions.

The direct action aspect of ISM's work is what makes the movement largely unique: activities include roadblock removals; staying overnight in homes that are slated to be demolished by the Israeli military and, when necessary and desired by the activist and the family, chaining oneself to the house in a last effort to avert its demolition; checkpoint watch (wherein ISM members record abuses at checkpoints throughout the West Bank, occasionally intervening in desperate situations to negotiate with soldiers about the passage of children, women, the

elderly and ambulances); and, most recently, direct attempts to tear down the newly erected Apartheid Wall and Fence. Other activities include documenting clashes between soldiers in tanks or in sniper towers and children throwing rocks in the streets, sending press releases to international newsmedia regarding invasions or attacks on cities or villages, and serving as a liaison between Israeli human rights groups and Palestinian activists on the ground.

My experience in the territories was not unique; I spent much of my time in Balata refugee camp, working alongside local Palestinian coordinators from the area, internationals from various countries (including Israel), and Palestinians only tangentially affiliated with the ISM. Balata is the largest refugee camp in the West Bank and lies adjacent to the largest West Bank city, ancient Nablus. Over half of the camp's 30,000 citizens are under the age of 16.

On the day of my arrival at the camp I was greeted by two APCs (small tanks) in the street below the house from which ISM operated. That day, over 40 people were injured in clashes with soldiers in Balata camp alone. The camp, which is considered by the Israeli military to be the "center of terrorist activity" in the West Bank, was to my eyes filled with poor people, most of whom were children. While it is true that Balata is a stronghold of various Palestinian fighting organizations, the groups, as I would later understand when I trained my ear to hear the differences between Israeli fire (of which there are myriad kinds) and resistance (of which there is one, quite distinguishable: the Kalashnikov), were not able to directly fight soldiers in the camp because of the lack of weaponry.

These facts may sound tangential: they are not. However, due to the nature of this miniature explanation of my trip and the immensity of the subject at hand, I will proceed to focus on what I now believe to be a devastatingly significant factor of occupation that is draining and destroying both Israeli and Palestinian populations alike: restriction of movement within the West Bank.

When I arrived at Balata, it was completely surrounded by roadblocks. Roadblocks are enormous piles of dirt, trash, rusted out cars, and broken pieces of concrete that are heaped into piles as high as 8 feet by Israeli military bulldozers. They obstruct roads and passages in a purported attempt to trap

"terrorists" inside a grid; thus, the conventional wisdom goes, when troops invade a camp or village intending to arrest suspects or activists, it will be impossible for them to escape. While it is true that it becomes impossible for anyone to escape the camp by car, it is also true, as it is with the 200 some checkpoints throughout the Bank, that the people who are disturbed and prevented from traveling are regular citizens. Fighters, on the other hand, in their desire to execute secretive missions, will ultimately seek alternative routes.

Balata's situation was no different. The main street, Market Street, on which farmers and merchants sell their wares every day, was completely blocked off, both North and South ends. Thus, every morning at 5 am, farmer's trucks would line up at either end of the street, back up close to the roadblock, and unload their goods, carrying them over the roadblock and then down the street a quarter of a mile to the marketplace. This time-intensive project is just one of many that reduce Palestinian economic viability by introducing unfair obstacles to farming, industry and consumer life. After consulting shop owners and the committees responsible for the organization of life in the camp, ISM members and many of Balata's men and children spent half a day with shovels attempting to create a hole large enough to allow passage of one truck. Unfortunately, Israeli troops eventually entered the camp, shot a few warning bullets, and confiscated our shovels, lecturing that what we were doing was "illegal."

Many people who tend to sympathize with Israel's aggression as a means of defense against the Palestinian population often applaud me for working with a group that is committed to non-violence. They usually then ask me why the Palestinians do not embark on a Gandhian mission of massive, non-violent disobedience. Sadly, the answer to this important question lies in Israel's policies of deportation, arrest and detainment, murder, and restriction of movement. During the first intifada, Palestinians *did* execute such massive operations non-violently; they were met with what the defense minister at the time termed an "iron fist." The New York Times reported in 1988 that Israeli troops went into villages and towns and arrested, in one overnight raid, 3,000 people whom they suspected to be involved in the strikes and protests. The policy of administrative

detention was also invented during the first intifada. Administrative detention, now legal under Israeli law but in defiance of international law, is a 6 month prison sentence given to people who are not accused of a crime nor given fair trial; military governors have the unchecked ability to renew the sentence indefinitely.

The ISM grew out of a desperate plea from Palestinian citizens for some help from the outside world, both to draw attention to their plight and to their largely ignored non-violent resistance. ISM's work has had small successes, helping sick people through checkpoints, drawing attention to crimes in the territories through press releases, and assuring Palestinians that they are not alone in their quest for justice. Yet the latest attempts to build this massive, Gandhian movement have been cut down repeatedly by the Israelis: first, through intimidation, by showing disregard for American and British life in the killings of activists Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall, and second, through a new Israeli law that requires all foreign citizens to apply for permits to enter the West Bank and Gaza, a measure clearly aimed at eliminating any foreign activist presence.

Finally, I learned, while I traveled with my white skin and American passport, that it is nearly impossible for Palestinians to travel to nearby cities, towns, and, often, even villages. One journey from Nablus to Tulkarem---a distance of approximately 40 miles---took a comrade and me 9 hours to traverse. Such a journey is equally time-intensive and much more perilous for the average Palestinian citizen, thereby making any sustained, organized, and effective non-violent resistance nearly impossible.

Yet, even through all of these obstacles and massive defeats, what amazed me most about the journey was not the flagrant and consistent human callousness, nor the lows to which human beings can stoop in their racism and hatred. Instead, it was the Palestinians' ability to remain hopeful in the face of catastrophe; it was their consistent embodiment of what the late and great Palestinian intellectual Edward Said termed a "pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will."

For more information:

www.palsolidarity.org (ISM site)

www.stopthewall.org (Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network site)