

What is Really Happening in Palestine?

Activist and Journalist Speaks to the Free Press about the Conflict and the Media

Interview with Kristen Schurr

By Ali Tonak

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As CNN covers the violence in the West Bank from a hotel in Tel Aviv, Kristen Schurr has put herself in the frontlines and made herself part of the story she is covering.

Part of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), Schurr is one of several dozen internationals who make direct action a crucial component of their reporting on Israeli attacks. The Seattle Weekly described these activists' "intent is to be foreign, nonviolent witnesses to the occupation-human cameras doing the work U.S. media mostly isn't, who could show their solidarity through their presence, through protests, through house rebuildings and olive tree plantings, and then return home to tell their stories and nurture their new friendships."

Schurr, 33, is currently enrolled at New School University working for her doctorate in Middle East politics. She went to Palestine with the ISM, a "direct action" tour of the West Bank for internationals organized by the Center for Rapprochement, a Palestinian NGO.

Schurr's riveting eyewitness accounts of various West Bank cities and refugee camps have circulated on the Internet and have been published in magazines with the help of other activists based in the U.S., who keep in touch with her and others in the West Bank via cell phone.

In an account she wrote two weeks ago from a refugee camp outside of Jenin, she described the condition of the war torn area. For instance, when people are arrested at Jenin Refugee Camp, she writes, "they are beaten and tortured and taken to the checkpoint where they are held for usually about three days without food. One guy told me he asked for water and was given a cup of urine to drink...Usually then they are dumped off 200 meters from the checkpoint and the people in these two villages, Ramani and Taiba, come by in a truck and pick them up and bring them into these two towns and take care of them. They've got a school set up as basically a refugee center for the refugees that are re-refugees. You can realize how just horrifying that is that people in a refugee camp are refugees again."

The Free Press spoke with Schurr once she entered the Jenin refugee camp.

FP: What've you been doing during your time in the occupied territories?

KS: The general idea is to have an international presence in Palestine. This is because the Israeli military forces do not at all honor Palestinian life but honor international life since a loss would anger the US government. American citizens have more freedom of movement than the Palestinians do.

I talk to a lot of people about what's happening to them and record what I can and give that on the radio. I write as often as I can get Internet access, not very often but... here I'm in Jenin, all the telephone lines have been cut and there's no Internet. There's not electricity in the camp of course; in most parts of town there's not. That's another thing that the Israeli military does is to target the infrastructure of the town; not just kill and demean people but they go after the basics of regular life. The regular life under the occupation mind you, not regular life as what most people in the world are familiar with.

FP: Now that you have seen the situation for yourself what do you think is the biggest distortion, even amongst people who are somewhat informed about the crises, about the situation in Palestine?

KS: Well the current biggest distortion is that the Israeli military is pulling out, that they are quieting in certain towns. I was in Nablus, I couldn't sleep for a night because the bombing was so loud and this is the same time that it's being reported that Nablus was quieting.

FP: I think it was on the front page of the New York Times yesterday that the Israeli military was pulling out.

KS: It's a lie. I got beat up by the troops inside Nablus and that was when they weren't supposed to be there. You know, that kind of stuff. That's really bizarre.

But the people seem to really take more seriously how much the death toll is. Hundreds of hundreds of Palestinians have been killed, but what people forget is that daily life underneath the occupation is a slow death, a humiliation. It's a deep humiliation to be unable to just cross the street without getting permission from the Israeli military. The Israeli military calls the Palestinians "dogs," they don't respect even the slightest bit of their humanity. I've seen it over and over again. I think that's some of the stuff that just regularly goes on that people forget about.

Palestinians can't really travel through the West Bank and this is what's supposed to be their territory, a tiny bit of the land that is actually theirs. People get stopped at checkpoints; they have to show their ID and get questioned by the soldiers and sort of prove their worthiness to go from one Palestinian village to the next. That's the life in the occupation that I think many people don't know about.

FP: Can you please describe the interactions that you've had with the media - both the Jewish and Palestinian media and western media such as CNN etc.?

KS: Sure, the Palestinian media has just taped, [Arabic cable channel] Al Jazeera or some other local media such as Bethlehem TV just taped; they haven't asked me any questions, they just tape specifically what I'm doing and then they put it on the news. There's never been any spin or anything about it. Its just "here's something that

happened today" and they showed the footage of it. If we're doing a demo, for example. The Israeli media has never asked me one question. It's hard to describe [my interaction with] the US corporate media and the BBC. I got interviewed by this guy who didn't leave East Jerusalem, which is just regular occupation. It's not under siege; it's not the same as West Bank or Gaza at all. It just seems like they're not really trying to see what's happening.

FP: You had previously talked about the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Could you please describe what your interaction has been with the IDF?

KS: The IDF, which is a joke of a name for one because, Israel Defense Forces, what are they defending against? Palestinians are so demoralized; they don't have anything as far as weapons. You should see the guns and the night vision and the tanks and the APC's and all the stuff that the Israeli's have.  
[phone cut off]

Ali: Hello?

KS: Hi, I'm on the roof right now, usually we can't go on the roof because of the snipers. Ok so, I've been generally harassed, they've tried to intimidate me; they point the turrets of their tanks at me and kind of shake them up and down. One of them climbed out of the top and yelled at me, told me to go home. I've of course been shot at more times than I can count but I don't know if they're trying to kill me because I think that if they were I would be dead, considering how many Palestinians they kill.

A woman was shot straight into the stomach and we thought that it was a ricochet bullet but it turned out it wasn't. The doctor at the hospital that was operating on her said it was straight into her stomach and it's a dum dum bullet, it has a hollow tip and those are illegal under international law. It split into two parts within her stomach.

FP: What about with the families you've been staying and acting as a human shields for, what has been your interaction with them?

KS: It's been some of the most remarkable interactions I've ever had in my life, people that somehow under occupation and under invasion are so generous and kind and loving. I've been called people's daughter and their sister. I get hugged and kissed on the cheeks every day. I'm never without anything that I need, I get more than I could possibly want as far as sharing the little bit of food that people have. Tea anytime, just so much love and kindness. I've been given little gifts and little girls always want to play with me. There is so much humanity here, people are so nice to me and... I wish there was a way to describe it, it sort of sounds stupid in a way but it's just... it makes me teary how great the people are here and what they have to put up with. [Crying] Their homes are rubble and they have nothing left and they're still nice to each other and they're still nice to me.

FP: I understand that you were outside the Church of Nativity when the Israeli forces invaded. Could you describe the scene around Merger Square?

KS: When the tanks rolled in to Bethlehem, they did it in stages. First they went into Beit Jala, which is the town just above, and took over that town with tanks and had house arrests and curfews and cut the electricity. Then they moved downhill, because that's their entrance point that the tanks were using to get into Bethlehem. The idea is that they're building settlements, Israeli settlements all the way around Bethlehem to completely isolate east Jerusalem and Bethlehem from the rest of the West Bank. Bethlehem is totally surrounded and it can't even be slightly connected to the rest of the West Bank.

Then they started coming in, some stayed on the outside and others came into the town and started rolling through the town and knocking things over and everyone's gone inside of course. You can't be out on the streets. Sometimes they'll make roads where there isn't a road so that the tanks can get through. They just devastate their path, just crush everything that they come across. The Church of Nativity and the Merger Square is one place where Palestinians tried to resist the invasion a bit. Of course they're completely out numbered, out armed, out everything; there's no chance.

The tanks surrounded Merger Square, they burned the mosque, they went in to the houses that surround Merger square, took out the families, stuck them in rooms under guard, went on top of all the houses and used them as sniper posts. The Church of Nativity is on Merger Square. They took this public space and filled it with tanks and soldiers, killing the Palestinians that were there, so some ran into this church. The church was filled with priests and nuns who were already there and a lot of everyday Palestinians happened to be caught outside or in one of the houses.

People have been held up in there for a couple of weeks now. I talked to some people via walkie-talkie that were inside there. They were getting along well with the nuns, and the priests were taking good care of them as much as they could. They had a well inside so they were able to get a little bit of water. There was a little bit of food in this one store that was inside the church. How it was described was: somebody held in an L with their thumb and the index finger, and said: "For every five men every day there is a square of bread like this." So they shared their food inside, some people would call their friends inside the camp with walkie-talkies and they would be crying and saying "we're waiting to die" and "we're gonna be killed, goodbye." People in the camp were just waiting, waiting to get the news of which one of their friends and their family was dead next. There are dead bodies in there, people were really injured and couldn't get out. Ambulances aren't allowed to get in there; we tried over and over to get ambulances inside, near Merger Square to get some of the people out. Even the people that were lying out on the square not even in the church that were dead, just to get them away. In one house there was a dead mother and a kid inside the house and the rest of the family was still there and they couldn't get out. They couldn't get the dead people out and they couldn't themselves get out, they would just sit there with dead bodies in this little house.

FP: How do the Palestinians feel about neighboring Arab States? Do they feel supported or abandoned?

KS: One Palestinian said to me, "You're better than any Arab government because you don't sit around and talk about peace, you actually came here." Another yesterday was saying, "Why doesn't anyone care about us, why are we so alone?" In general, I certainly haven't talked to every single Palestinian, so I can't say how everyone feels at all - they feel very abandoned and disappointed and pretty alone. They know that the punishment at the hands of the US for any country who stands up to the US or does her own thing is - you know sanctions, look at Cuba. How long has this blockade been going on, since the fifties? I think that a lot of Palestinians seem to be aware of the fact that going against the consensus of the US and its cronies is slow or immediate death like sanctions or bombing. Palestinians feel like they're pretty alone and that's why they thank you so much when internationals show up here

FP: Do you see any positive outcome or a Palestinian state in the near future?

KS: The Israelis are now talking about having a security buffer zone. They want to bring the green line in 8 miles further so all the way around the west bank Palestinians will lose another 8 miles. Considering that there are resolutions saying that there should be right to return, there should be pre '67 borders. Palestinians have really gotten screwed on every single corner. People are saying now here in Jenin "no one is going to believe in this peace propaganda, after this massacre there is just no way." I don't think that there's gonna be any sort of Palestinian state because it's never gone that way. Even in Oslo Arafat signed away most of the rights of the Palestinians, and the Israelis still didn't honor that. I think that the situation in general is pretty hopeless. Except that the Palestinians have so much hope and goodness and the ability to deal with all of this. That's the good part. Sharon's massacres, he's the one that instigated the second intifada. People protested him going to the Al Asqa Mosque on a really holy day. They shot the protesters and killed eleven kids who were protesting.