Union Aid Abroad
APHEDA

Labor 4A Just Palestine

Middle East
Study Trip Report
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Introduction

We were very fortunate to be part of the Union Aid Abroad–APHEDA overseas study tour of 11 trade union officials and members and three APHEDA staff to the Middle East in March 2010. Five of the participants came from Queensland.

This report is by three of the participants from Queensland who are also Co-conveners of Labor 4A Just Palestine and who were either on all or part of the trip:

- Evan Moorhead MP
- Wendy Turner
- David Forde

The tour visited Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza), with the main purpose to examine APHEDA’s aid projects assisting Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, food security and agriculture projects with Palestinian families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and projects of medical assistance to the El Wafa Medical Rehabilitation Hospital in Gaza.

We also met with a broad range of stakeholders to gain as much knowledge and insight as possible, including; Palestinian and Israeli trade unions and NGOs, Israeli and Palestinian workers’ organisations including for the illegal settlements, members of the Palestinian Legislative Assembly, member of the Palestinian Peace Negotiating Team, the Director of UNRWA Gaza, the UN Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, the Australian Ambassador to Israel and the Australian Representative in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

For us, as critical as humanitarian projects are, they are only a band-aid solution until a political solution is found. We also wanted to hear from every day people on the ground.

Illegal Israeli Settlements and by-pass roads

Since 1967, approximately 500,000 illegal Israeli Jewish settlers have occupied various parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, generally on higher ground and with control over access to water. The growth of these illegal settlements continues apace. We witnessed (with photographic evidence) settlement expansion in the West Bank despite the Israeli government committing to a temporary freeze in the West Bank.

Adding to the dispossession of Palestinians from their land, the settlements are generally surrounded by no-go zones that vary in size from a couple of hundred metres to approximately one kilometre and are connected by settler-only highways which also have wide no-go zones for Palestinians. With almost 60% of the West Bank now annexed by the settlements, settler-only roads, closed military zones and the separation barrier, Palestinians are increasingly squeezed into a small number of “districts” or “bantustans”.

Traveling along an Israeli only road in the Palestinians Territories, it is apparent that the Israeli Government has created an environment where a settler traveling to an Israeli city from their settlement in the Palestinian West Bank, must feel that they are in Israel.
The Separation Barrier

Since 2002, a 700km nine-metre high wall (in some parts), fortified and electrified fence in other parts, is being constructed throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The vast majority of the barrier does not follow the pre-1967 “Green Line” which is the recognised international border between Israel and the Palestinian Territories; rather it cuts through Palestinian land, annexing approximately 10% of the West Bank, including prime agricultural land and important water aquifers.

The path of the barrier has resulted in ongoing evictions and demolition of Palestinian homes and uprooting of crops leaving families homeless and without means of subsistence. The barrier frequently cuts through Palestinian communities and towns, separating families and cutting farmers off from their land.

The Israeli Government says the barrier was built for security reasons and it has to be acknowledged that suicide bombings and the fear of such did prevail. But if the barrier was really about security, why was it not built along the internationally recognised Israeli Palestinian border as the current route brings hundreds of thousands of Palestinians onto the Israeli side.

The most extreme situation that we witnessed was the Palestinian town of Qalqilya (population approx 45,000), which is almost entirely enclosed by the barrier with the only entry and exit point controlled by the Israeli military (in the West Bank). Very often as reported to us, this access point is closed. To witness the sheer poverty imposed on the people of this town through economic starvation was of major concern.

NGOs and local Palestinians reported to us how families trapped between the barrier and the internationally recognised border are subjected to the most extreme conditions, including restrictions on food, access to land and external medical facilities in emergency situations. We fail to understand how this is in the name of security.

In many of the communities affected by wall, there appears to be a deliberate Israeli Government strategy of creating circumstances of extreme hardship against the civilian population in order to ‘encourage’ them to leave.

Water access in the West Bank

Lack of access to water for Palestinian communities in the West Bank was another issue of concern that was raised. This is particularly the case in the Jordan Valley, where it was reported that Palestinians are generally prohibited from accessing new water wells in an area where illegal Israeli settlers have access to, approximately 10 times the amount of water available to the Palestinians.

Amnesty International reported that the average consumption for Palestinians is about 70 litres a day per person which is below the 100 litres per capita daily recommendation by the World Health Organisation. Israeli settler daily per capita consumption is more than four times as much at about 300 litres. In some rural communities, Palestinians survive on barely 20 litres per day.
The UN reported that the Israeli military destroy Palestinian water wells and pumps in agricultural areas that severely impact on community’s livelihoods. Again, we fail to see how this is in the name of security.

Checkpoints in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

The UN also reported that there are approximately 550 military checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Palestinians on their way to work, medical appointments, even children on their way to school and students attending university are often kept waiting at these checkpoints for lengthy periods, often hours before being permitted to proceed by the Israeli soldiers.

We ourselves witnessed many Palestinians being treated in this way before being permitted to proceed through the checkpoint.

The road-blocks also serve to severely restrict the Palestinian economy from functioning through denial or limitations of access while boosting the Israeli economy through priority access. This was very evident in Palestinian East Jerusalem, which appeared to be flooded with Israeli (bar-coded) goods while excluding Palestinian goods.

Palestinian workers in the illegal Settlements

We attended meetings with the three Palestinian Union Federations; the General Union of Palestinian Workers, Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Independent Unions of Palestine.

We also met with the Israeli Histadrut Federation, worker advice centres (both in Palestine and Israeli) and Palestinian workers from the settlements.

Here is a general outline of some of our findings;

• Despite an Israeli High Court decision in 2007, Palestinian workers are still paid well below the minimum wage.
• While Jewish workers in the settlements generally keep to eight-hour shifts, Palestinian workers in the same settlements are denied such rights and generally finish when they are permitted (this is not a complaint against Jewish workers).
• Most industrial zones in the settlements have been transferred from Israel into the West bank for environmental (lack of) reasons - in other words "not in my back yard".
• Industrial zones generally do not have proper waste management strategies with pollutants often discharged onto the Palestinian land below (most settlements are on higher ground).
• The Palestinian unions are not allowed to represent Palestinian workers in these settlements/industrial zones.
• The Histadrut will not represent these workers and claimed that they don't receive any complaints.
• However, the Histadrut are well aware that Palestinian workers cannot enter Israel to lodge any complaint without special passes that are impossible to obtain and the legal system is financially prohibitive for Palestinians.
• Palestinian workers are denied basic rights and are often subject to an environment of humiliation.
• Palestinian workers have to purchase a licence to work in settlements and generally do not receive employment papers or pay slips.
• Palestinian workers are tied to the one employer under threat of revocation of work permits should they raise industrial issues.
• Palestinian workers injured in the workplace are frequently either/both docked wages and sacked.

The plight of the Palestinian workers in these industrial zones (including some of the people we met) is covered in an online documentary; *Seeds of peace*, which can be viewed online at: www.march21.nl/seedsofpeace

**Gaza**

We were unsure what to expect on entering Gaza (the three members of the group – born in Australia – with Arabic sounding names were denied entry by the Israeli security without explanation).

Israel has imposed a blockade and economic sanctions against Gaza since June 2007. Entering Gaza was a very eerie feeling as straight away we were confronted with large scale destruction.

While it may exist, we did not come across religious fundamentalism, but rather a people who were trying to get on with their lives under the most extreme circumstances. Extreme poverty and destruction was almost everywhere due to the blockade.

We did witness some areas with limited destruction that provided evidence of some sort of economic normality before the blockade. We met with farmers who are struggling to diversify their crops to try to help subsidise food supplies. This is becoming increasingly difficult due to the contamination of soil and water supplies. Palestinians have no access to laboratory testing to check for disease and contamination levels.

The issue regarding the restrictions on food entering Gaza and the critical water situation should be of concern to the federal government. Gaza is fast running out of access to clean water due to the fuel blockade as untreated water contaminates the remaining 5% of water that is drinkable.

The UN reported the lack of electricity to operate sewage treatment plants results in some 80 million litres of untreated and/or partially treated waste water being released into the environment every day, with 10 million litres of raw sewage discharged daily into the Mediterranean sea resulting in the contamination of fish stocks and denying livelihoods. This situation has become so dire through wide spread contamination, the sewage is now impacting on Israel’s southern coast and as far away as Cyprus. The Israeli navy also enforces a sea blockade on Palestinian fishermen of three nautical miles offshore from the Gaza strip.

The UN in Gaza referred to the blockage as illegal, inhumane, counter-productive and contravening international law.
Two observations were very clear; firstly, it is Hamas who benefits from the blockade though taxes from the tunnels and it is the civilian population that includes 750,000 children who suffer. Secondly, should the tunnels be shut down, there is the very real potential for mass starvation among 1.5 million people as the UN are prevented from importing adequate foods and medicines.

According to the latest UN report, aid into Gaza has dropped by 18% for 2010 compared to the 2009 monthly average.

It is our view the blockade is inhumane and counter-productive and not focused on security. The UN continually gives the Israeli Government assurances that it will monitor all aid entering Gaza, including building materials to rebuild badly needed infrastructure such as schools should such aid be permitted.

Palestinian Prisoners

It is estimated that there are between 8,000 – 10,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, including over 300 children and one-third of the elected Palestinian Legislative Council.

Many prisoners are held in administrative detention for up to periods of 6 months without charge and limited access to legal representation. The administrative detention period can be increased by six months at the conclusion of any six-month period and without legal representation.

Hamas has also imprisoned an Israeli soldier since 2006.

Palestinian Refugees

There are approximately four million Palestinian refugees as a result of the partition plan of 1947 and the war of 1967. Four hundred thousand of these refugees are in Lebanon.

We visited the Palestinian refugee camp of Bouj al Barajneh (Beirut) - it was confronting and one that gave a feeling of significant concern for their plight. There are 20,000 Palestinian refugees inside two sq km with very little assistance.

The Israeli Government, despite UN Resolutions addressing this issue, denies them the right to return or compensation for their former homes. Their living conditions are a humanitarian shame.

The Palestinian refugee problem is not a problem that will ‘go away’ or be resolved without greater international intervention.

We acknowledge that it may be impractical to re-house all four million refugees inside Israel/Palestine, but those countries that supported the partition plan of 1947 should be called upon to provide greater assistance through financial compensation or offers of resettlement.
This is particularly the case for those refugees in Lebanon, many have tertiary education, but are denied access to the vast majority of the Lebanese labour market due to the political situation in that country. As a result, they have basically become a people without hope, but a people who are searching for something to hope for.

While not the preferred outcome, many of the Palestinian refugees in the camp stated they would gladly accept resettlement in a third country.

**Access to Holy sites**

When the 1947 Partition Plan was passed at the UN to establish the state of Israel (on 55% of the land, far less that it currently occupies), Jerusalem and Bethlehem were to be administered by the international community so that access was equally available to all due to the religious significance for the three Abrahamic faiths.

It is our view that in any final peace agreement, that access to the religious sections of the Old City of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron should receive at the very least UN observer status so as to ensure safe and secure access for everyone free of an environment of intimidation.

Whether someone is religious or not, visiting these three locations and their associated religious sites underlined their significance and this is something that cannot be dismissed.

It was also of concern to us, to witness Palestinians in Palestinian East Jerusalem, being denied the right to pray in their places of worship by the Israeli security forces.

**Peace Process**

The vast majority of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews that we spoke to want a two state solution where they can remain ‘removed from the other’. Our view has strengthened in support of such an outcome because there appears to be too much resentment, mistrust and fear of domination. However, we are far more pessimistic that this can be achieved through continued Israeli settlement expansion and facts on the ground.

All Palestinians and Palestinian organisations that we met, called for an end to the illegal occupation and a return to internationally recognised ‘1967 borders’ as per United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (and many other UN Resolutions) as a starting point to achieve a just and viable two state solution.

To paraphrase the Director of the UN in Gaza; the peace process is ‘hurting’ towards the cliff’s edge, its not too late to save it, but once it goes over the cliff it will affect all of ‘us’, in that we may end up with an outcome far greater than regional war.

Since the expansion of Israel beyond the ‘1967 borders’, all the Palestinians have ever been offered to date is a patchwork of reservations not consistent with any viable state and this is not in Israel’s long-term security interests.
The current situation is unsustainable and will eventually play into the hands of those who want to see an end to the state of Israel through a one state solution – this is a situation that has been acknowledged by some Israeli MPs and by Palestinians and Israelis we spoke to on the ground.

Iran is not Israel’s greatest danger as Israel is the world’s fourth greatest military power; it is Israel itself through continued land expansion and colonisation of Palestinian land.

The Arab league has twice offered Israel full diplomatic recognition in return for an end to the occupation and a return to the recognised '1967 borders'. This would not only offer the state of Israel the greatest security guarantee by co-existing side by side with a viable Palestinian state, it would also isolate terror groups, starve global terror groups of the oxygen they draw from this conflict, ensure greater world peace and isolate any ambition Iran has to become a regional power.

General David Petraeus, commander of the US Central Command described the Israel-Palestine conflict as a "root cause of instability" and an "obstacle to peace" that is playing into the hands of Iran and al-Qaeda (March 2010).

Israel has achieved peace with Jordan and Egypt, with Egypt it was as a result of ending the occupation of Egyptian land, which underlines that ending the occupation is Israel’s greatest security guarantee.

The Palestinian chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, claims that the illegal settlements are now reaching a “tipping point” and soon a one-state solution will be the only option and Ehud Barak, former Israeli Prime Minister and current Defence Minister, has stated that “Israel will be an apartheid state if no peace deal is reached”. (Haaretz, March 7th, 2010).

Conclusion based on our observations

We believe that both the Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in peace and security within internationally accepted borders in accordance with United Nations Resolutions and we found that the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians want such an outcome in their own independent states.

The best way for Israel to achieve genuine and lasting security is for an end to the occupation and colonisation of the Palestinian Territories. Continuation of the annexation of Palestinian land, resources and denial of basic human rights only increases an environment of marginalisation and radicalisation.

We observed limited signs of economic activity in some Palestinian cities and towns. However, until the occupation ends, the Palestinian economy will remain severely restricted as will the ability of the Palestinian Authority to operate on behalf of its people.

The Palestinians are not going to accept a “this is as good as it gets” outcome that does not include East Jerusalem as their capital. They as one (both Muslims and Christians), called for an end to the occupation and a return to ‘1967 borders’ as the starting point for any discussion of land swaps.
Many international unions now support the call by all Palestinian Union Federations and political parties for (at a minimum) a boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and against companies involved in the construction and expansion of the settlements.

This is a position that we can see no alternative but to support as a result of our experience.

The British Government has also issued an advisory for UK supermarket chains to label goods produced in these settlements as such and the EU has removed special tax concessions from Israeli goods produced in settlements.

There has been much violence through this conflict and the people want and deserve peace. Violence needs to be condemned on all sides of the conflict, especially the targeting of civilians. When you remove the ‘rule of law’ in any society, the ‘rule of the gun’ prevails.

There is some support for the opinion that peace is not in the interest of sections of the Israeli Government as this will mean an end to settlement expansion, just as peace is not in the interest of some Palestinians who do not accept the state of Israel’s right to exist.

For these reasons we believe that the international community (including Australia) needs to take a stronger position in ensuring that a meaningful two state solution can still be achieved before it is beyond a viable option.

It is time for those who support a genuine two state solution and/or who claim to be friends of Israel, to apply strong meaningful diplomatic pressure on the Israeli government to save the state of Israel from its own demise.

It is our view that the current situation of Israeli expansion over security is not sustainable.

**What can Australia do?**

While this report may appear to outline some intractable circumstances, we believe that there is hope for peace in Palestine and Israel and like all other nations Australia has a role to play in support of a just peace.

In our view, Australia can support Israel and Palestine towards a just and lasting peace by:

**(a) Upholding international law**

This means supporting a two-state solution based on the internationally recognised 1967 Green Line border between Israel and Palestine. Recognising these borders must include:

- ending the occupation in the Palestinian Territories;
- opposition to the separation barrier and illegal settlements beyond the 1967 Green Line; and
• opposition to the demolition of Palestinian homes, particularly in East Jerusalem and the lifting of severe restrictions on Palestinian home building permits;

Australia can further support the upholding of international law by not allowing illegal settlements to benefit financially from the exploitation of Palestinian people. We see no reason why Australia should not support calls for a boycott on goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements and companies involved in settlement construction and expansion.

The rule of law also requires independent scrutiny of participant actions. Australia’s support for international law should also include supporting the Goldstone Report into alleged war crimes by both the Israeli Defence Forces and Hamas.

(b) Providing a humanitarian response

The urgent priority is to lift the economic, humanitarian and movement restrictions placed on Palestinian people on their own land.

End the suffering of the people of Gaza by lifting the blockade and restrictions on Gaza to allow humanitarian aid to rebuild schools, homes, hospitals and civil infrastructure so as to provide for the likes of safe clean drinking water and allowing people in Gaza to fish unhindered in Gaza’s waters.

While the political context of the Middle East is often the subject of media attention, the plight of Palestinian refugees is less well known even though there is a United Nations Resolution (194) giving Palestinian refugees the right to return or compensation for property loss.

Australia can further support a humanitarian response for displaced people by:

• recognising externally displaced Palestinians in camps in Lebanon, Jordan and other locations as refugees and allowing access to humanitarian visas; and
• continuing to support humanitarian aid projects to assist refugees, particularly in the Gaza and Lebanon.

(c) A condemnation of violence

This conflict will not be solved by violence but only by support for the rule of law.

Condemnation of violence and provocation must be consistent across all parties of this conflict that threatens not only the security of Palestine and Israel, but also has the potential to affect all nations.

If you require any further information or seek clarification, contact David Forde on 0413 874 008