

Report of the visit from Walsall and Dudley to the West Bank, April 2013

11 members and friends of the Walsall Kobar Friendship Association visited the West Bank in April 2013. Friends from the Twinning Network in Palestine organised visits around Ramallah, Jerusalem including Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan and the old city, Salfeet and Hebron. Six members of the group then went to Kobar, Walsall's twinning village. The remaining five split into two groups, one visiting Bethlehem and the other group exploring Ramallah further before rejoining and visiting a village outside Qalqilya to explore a possible friendship link with Stourbridge.

Key themes explored during the first part of the trip:

1. The Apartheid Wall

- Salfeet – visiting the home of a Palestinian farmer whose house has been cut off from the rest of Salfeet by the Apartheid Wall. The farmer has to give access to anyone going to his house, including his children, by unlocking a gate in the wall. He can no longer see his neighbour's house from his front door and it takes him an hour to reach his farm land instead of the 3 minutes it took before the wall was built.
- Checkpoints – experiencing some of the disruption, intimidation and humiliation of the checkpoint on the Ramallah/Jerusalem Road (nothing like the same problem for western visitors as for Palestinians, most of whom are not normally allowed into Jerusalem at all).

2. Israeli settlers / Palestinian evictions

- Sheikh Jarrah
Listening to the Mohammed El Kurd telling us about his family's eviction from the house that his father built next to his grandmother's house and the Israeli settlers who now live there
- Silwan
The threatened eviction of 1500 Palestinians from 90 homes to make space for an Israeli park in East Jerusalem.
- Hebron
Visiting the home of a Palestinian whose first wife had been shot and killed by Israeli settlers whilst heavily pregnant, whose son was in hospital having had acid poured on him by an Israeli settler whilst he was in the street below, and whose two other sons were in hospital being treated for psychological disorders.

Meeting a Swedish international observer, staying in Hebron for 3 months to watch Palestinian children walking to and from school and recording attacks made on them by Israeli settlers (fortunately these attacks have decreased since the observers have been in Hebron).

Walking through the triple turnstile checkpoint to go to the Ibrahimi Mosque and visiting the Jewish side that has been converted into a synagogue.

Visiting a Palestinian shop that is now cut off from the rest of Hebron old city. Other Palestinians cannot visit and the shop survives solely on purchases made by solidarity visitors.

3. Palestinian prisoners

- Visiting Samer Issawi's parents and hearing their harrowing story.
- Meeting the Chair of the Prisoner's Association who came to speak to us about the catastrophic plight of Palestinian prisoners.
- Watching the powerful presentation by the Girls' Secondary School, Kobar.

4. Water and pollution

- Meeting Dr Adbellatif Mohammed, Deputy General Secretary of the Agricultural Development Association (PARC) to talk about the water situation in Palestine.
- Salfet – stopping to see and smell the raw sewage from the nearby Israeli settlement being dumped in a river on Palestinian land.

5. Youth Groups

- Meeting with Muharram Al-Barghouthi, General Director of the Palestinian Youth Union.

6. Refugee Camps

- Talk with Noor and Mona about refugee camps in the West Bank.

The visit to Kobar

All six members of the group who visited Kobar stayed at Abdulsater (Abed) and Bahiyah's house and were warmly welcomed – many thanks to everyone in Kobar for their kindness and hospitality. We were quite overwhelmed with everyone's hospitality and the number of homes that we were invited into.

Key themes arising from the visit to Kobar:

1. Schools

- a. Girls' Secondary School. The tour of the school was extremely interesting and the 'Prisoners Day' event was tremendous with a mixture of drama, dance, song and speeches followed by a lovely meal prepared by some of the mothers. The head of the boys' school was invited and an ex prisoner from Kobar was the guest of honour. The head teacher is keen to keep in contact with us.
- b. Boys' Secondary School. We visited the new boys' secondary school. The new head teacher is keen to develop international links and is particularly keen to link with a school in Walsall interested in environmental issues. The school has a website that includes information about Walsall.
- c. Girls' Primary School. We arrived at playtime and spent time talking to the girls and staff who showed us a lovely mosaic that they were making outside in the playground.
- d. Boys' Primary School. We made a tour of the boys' primary school with the head teacher and observed two lessons being taught.

2. The New Mosque

It was good to see the progress on the new mosque. We saw the two completed prayer rooms on the lower level and work on the higher level where there are going to be community rooms.

3. The Women's Co-operative

Unfortunately we were late in visiting the Women's Co-operative and missed the group of women who had planned to greet us. Bahiyah came to show us the new olive oil soap project that the co-operative is involved with. This project links with Oxfam and will hopefully provide a successful route for produce to be sold.

4. The Municipality

The contact made between councillors from both Walsall and Kobar has been useful in strengthening our friendship links.

5. Kobar hospitality

- Being well looked after at Abed and Bahiyah's lovely house. Sarah, Leen and Amr keeping us entertained.
- Great visits to Sowsan's, Ameera's, Sabreen's and Bahiyah's relatives houses.
- Picnic in the olive groves, football match: Kobar v Bethlehem.

With thanks for an extremely well organised visit,

**Mohammad Arif, Sue Collingswood, Helen Faux, Lizzie Faux, Pauline Faux,
Eric Frankham, Martin Lynch, Dave Morris, Lyn Morris, Tony Pearce, Ursula Walker**