

## Education under Occupation

It is early morning when I arrive to monitor children going to school. We are in Tuqu' which is a large village nestled in the hills south of Bethlehem. An Israeli army jeep is parked outside the house adjacent to the primary school and girls secondary school. Four heavily armed soldiers stand looking bored. Teachers start to arrive and position themselves next to the busy road in anticipation of children. By 7am the road is flooded with children walking in both directions on the stones at the side of the road. Today is a quiet day, the soldiers just stand and watch but it clearly makes some children nervous.

'Why would human rights monitors need to watch children going to school' you might ask, 'Checkpoints I can understand, but a school?'



*Photo: Sophie at Tuqu' school run, October 2012 (Ellinor Nykvist)*

Tuqu' borders two Israeli settlements, Tekoa and Nokdim, both of which are illegal under International Humanitarian Law.<sup>1</sup> EAPPI provides protective presence twice a week to this cluster of three schools totalling 1180 students because the Israeli military are stationed next to the schools every day when the students arrive and leave. The presence of EAs is to protect the children from soldier or settler harassment. The military are stationed there to protect the settlers who use the road from stones that children have thrown in the past. Soldiers harassed children, come armed into the school yard and have thrown tear gas into classrooms. The schools are located on a busy settler bypass road so the children's commute therefore involves crossing the busy road as well as passing the armed soldiers.

Like many West Bank villages, Tuqu' and the Israeli military have a contentious history. I spoke to fourteen year old Fadeelh who described her personal experience: "It was midnight on a Sunday. The soldiers came into our house and took my brother. They kept him for 6 months and beat him, he was just 17. Now he is 18, he came back different. He didn't finish school, he just started working. When I see the soldiers I remember this." This is not an isolated incident, almost every child we spoke to has a story of a family member being taken and questioned or beaten by Israeli soldiers in the night.

The detention and mistreatment of children from the schools has been a significant problem for the villagers of Tuqu' for a number of years. Summer 2012 saw the arrest of three teenage boys from the secondary school, one of whom is still detained. They are detained under the authority of the Israeli Defence Force commander so no one knows how long it will last. The most frequent reason for which the boys are detained is throwing stones. Stone throwing is viewed as a crime against the security of the state of Israel and therefore these children are tried in a military court.<sup>2</sup> Fourteen year old Rana told me what happened to her younger sibling: "My brother Ahmed is just 9 years old. They arrested him in front of the school and took him away. The teacher was crying and shouting that they must bring him back. The soldiers said the boys



*Photo: Children at Tuqu' elementary school, October 2012 (Sophie Wickham)*

<sup>1</sup> Article 49, Fourth Geneva Convention, 1949

<sup>2</sup> *The Impact of Child Detention: Occupied Palestinian Territory*, Save the Children [2012] p24

throw stones. When they let him go, the soldier said that if any boy throws stones, they will come and take Ahmed. I am afraid every day that they will come for him.”

Historically the problem has not been limited to detention and mistreatment alone. Since the second intifada or Palestinian uprising, four boys from the secondary school have been shot dead, the last in 2008, when Rana was in grade 6. When I talk to students and teachers, these memories appear to be ever present in their minds.

The students are strong and resilient. When I talk to girls from the secondary school they are full of appreciation for their education and said things like “The soldiers are strong because they have guns. We are strong in our hearts”. However, the teachers and parents provide insight into the unseen impact of military presence on the children. “Children are stressed and afraid when the army is outside the school, which affects their concentration. They keep looking out the window to see if the soldiers are there. Their grades drop and some leave the school early. This differs from child to child” explains the boys’ school counsellor. No matter how motivated the children are, this intimidating and unpredictable environment is obviously not conducive to quality education.

Like the children, most of the teachers here have grown up knowing only occupation. There are parts of it that are accommodated: the children have classes about not allowing themselves to be provoked by the military and importantly not to react by throwing stones as the consequences for them are so severe.

A teacher at the girl’s school tells me what it is like to educate children in this environment: “It is very difficult to be a teacher here. Sometimes the soldiers come to our homes and villages too, not just at school. At the school the army throw tear gas into the classrooms. We have to be always ready with onions [which mitigate the harmful affect of tear gas]. Last year they did this and the headmistress went out to the entrance of the school to talk to them but they did not care. Two years ago a colleague was pregnant and had to be rushed to hospital after they tear gassed. We put the children inside the classroom, but we can’t protect them from the soldiers.” I see that these incidents from the recent past are all very present in the minds of children whenever they see the soldiers. When the students walk past the soldiers, it inevitably raises their anxiety levels about the military in general. It is these soldiers who have taken their brothers and fathers, who have shot their classmates and thrown tear gas into their schools.

Military presence at these schools is a direct effect of the military occupation but the occupation affects the villagers’ lives in other ways too. The road that the children walk along and cross to get to school is now a busy highway. It was likely never intended to be such a major trade route. However the construction of the Separation Barrier around Bethlehem necessitated an alternative route from the city of Hebron to Ramallah. It is also the main route between the Israeli settlements and from these settlements to Jerusalem. Settlers drive at high speed which may protect them from potential stone throwing but is also very dangerous for the young children. This road is designated Area C under the Oslo Accords, which means that the Israeli government control both civil and security matters. As a result, neither the schools nor the Palestinian municipality have the power to address the safety problems. All manners of redress, speed bumps or traffic light crossings for example, are at the discretion of the Israeli state. When petitioned, they have proved unwilling to tackle student safety since any effort to slow the traffic would, from the viewpoint of the settlers, make them more vulnerable to stones.



*Photo: Bypass road Tuqu school, October 2012 (Adele du Toit)*

The military presence also affects the school’s neighbours. I met a young woman called Asma who lives in the house next door with her husband and three young children. She made me lovely mint tea and shared with me what it is like for her to have the soldiers stationed outside her house every day. “I am

afraid to go out when the soldiers are there. And we cannot go to our windows because they shout at us to get back.” Her children run out the back door to get to school. “The older two children have got used to it”, she told me, “but the youngest is only four and he is very afraid of the soldiers still.” The soldiers periodically occupy the house as a look out point to see if boys are throwing stones. She described a time two years ago when the soldiers came at 5am and put the whole family in the back room until midnight while they took over the house.



*Photo: Tuqu' primary school registration, September 2012 (John Cassel)*

I am not a parent and so I cannot fully appreciate what it must be like to have to send your children to school in these villages if you want them to get an education. My Swedish colleague met with Mohammed whose sons attend the boy's school. He said to her: "I am worried every day. You never know if your children will return from school." Another parent described the effect of the Israeli military occupation on Palestinian children's access to education: "The military affects the children in different ways. Psychologically many children have nightmares and are afraid. Practically the military put up flying checkpoints and look at passports and IDs on their way to school. At another level they threaten to shut down the school completely."

One conversation that really touched me was with thirteen year old Zeynab. She welled up when she told me how "one day when I was leaving school, a soldier came up to me and asked me about my brother. He held his gun on my shoulder. When the soldiers are far away, I am not afraid. When they come close, I am afraid."

Education is not as accessible in Tuqu' as it should be. The barriers are significant. Israel ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, Article 28 of which recognises 'the right of the child to education' and Article 38 of which reinforces '[i]n accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.' Article 2 provides that the state of Israel cannot legally discriminate on the basis of race or national origin so Palestinian children under the jurisdiction of Israel as they are in the occupied territory, should be treated according to the same standards as Israeli children.

As an ecumenical accompanier I leave the Tuqu' schools at 8am. Sometimes the military have dispersed by then, but even if they have they will return at midday when school is out and we cannot be there.

Disclaimer: I work for Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) as an ecumenical accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The views contained in this email are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of QPSW or the World Council of Churches.