

Rocky Road to School – in the West Bank

by paivimoore

Schools will soon be out for the summer here in Palestine. In the last two weeks of the spring semester, pupils go into school each day just to take one examination in the mornings. Then they return home. Over the past two months or so, we EAs in South Hebron Hills have visited many schools in the region. Nearly every single one of them has had worries and concerns that they have passed on to us.

Schools that are located in ISF Firing zones find themselves under multiple threats. They are denied building permits, which means the structures are torn down at regular intervals. Hamed Qawasmeh, in his capacity as Director of the Hebron International Resources Network (HIRN), has been involved on the financing side in many building projects. He helps among many other things Palestinian villages in the military areas to acquire portable structures for their schools, so that they can more easily be dismantled and moved elsewhere when the bulldozers and the excavators show up.



Another subject close to Hamed's heart is the education of girls. Fathers in some of the more conservative villages tend to pull their daughters out of school when they reach adolescence, if they have to attend mixed classes with boys. Hamed does what he can to help these village schools to get separate blocks for the girls, in order that the parents would not be so inclined to terminate their schooling. Last summer, Hamed collected funds for this Bedouin school in the village of Zweidin, east of Yatta, in order to get a separate classroom for 10th Grade girls. I asked Hamed: "Wouldn't it be more sensible to enlighten the parents?" "No", he answered. "It is much too slow a process. Only by educating the girls can you enlighten future parents."

One sees a lot of schoolchildren in Palestine. They are often out and about in groups, and here in the relatively remote villages of South Hebron Hills they giggle among themselves when they spot a foreigner. "Hello! What's your name?" they shout cheerily from afar. Outsiders are a relatively rare sight hereabouts. But in some places the kids are all too familiar with the sight of foreigners, and it is not a good sign. It usually means something is wrong in their daily lives.



Photo: N. Rivera



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In some villages, for instance, the local children have to walk to and from school along the side of settler roads. One example is the kids returning from school in Banī Na'īm to their homes in the village of Bīrīn. In the past the settlers driving by on the road have behaved aggressively towards the children, with the result that international volunteers have been asked to walk home with the kids at regular intervals.



Photo: J. Fisher



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There are many dangerous roads to and from school, but the path children take between the tiny hamlet of Tuba and the schools in nearby At-Tuwani is in a league all of its own. The route they must follow goes through the Israeli settlement of Ma'on, dating from 1981. The settlers here are notoriously violent, with a long history of attacks – even against children. Consequently, the most dangerous stretch of the road to and from school has had to be patrolled by Israeli soldiers. The same practice continues to this day, for the hostile settlers in the outpost above the road have not gone anywhere. It is indeed a bizarre sight to behold. The children wait under a tree, and they set off only when the military vehicle arrives to safeguard their trip.



And then there is a place where the only image I have is this long-distance shot, because photography there is expressly forbidden. The kids of the village of Al Seefer have to pass through the Israeli-manned checkpoint of Beit Yatir every single day on their way to and from school. It is a fifteen-minute walk, door to door, but they never know how long the process will take. Every day, the same kids' schoolbags and satchels are inspected, birth certificates are shown for the hundredth time to soldiers who know perfectly well who the kids are, and there are body searches, particularly of the older girls. This sort of thing should not be a part of the daily process of going to school. Anywhere. We went today to the school that these children attend, in Imneizil. We asked the school's principal whether the daily inspections at the checkpoint have affected the kids. He looked rather gloomily at the floor and admitted: "Yes, they *are* different from the others. They are often late for school, they are often irritable, and they do not do well in class." He called in the older girls referred to above. We asked them how long the inspections at the checkpoint usually take. "About half an hour", they told us in quiet, shy tones. I asked the principal if there was any counselling available for the pupils; access to a psychologist. "Well, in Yatta, yes, perhaps", he replied, "But not way down here." We South Hebron EAs decided that we would do what we could to see to it that the girls at least get some support.