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Communities on the Edge

Driving along the Jericho road from Jerusalem down towards the Dead Sea, the saffron coloured landscape undulates under the heat of the midday sun, and the clusters of olive trees and vineyards give way to rocky escarpments where only the hardiest of shrubs are able to grow. This is the Judean desert, a place of timeless beauty and transcendence, and yet a landscape scarred and ravaged by profound structural injustice. For deep into the Palestinian West Bank, indigenous Palestinians have been forced off their land to make way for Israeli settlements, illegal under international law and seen by many as one of the main obstacles for peace.



Alongside these illegal settlements, on the scraps of craggy wastelands where little grows, make-shift Bedouin communities eke out a meagre existence, shepherding their flocks of goats amidst the dust of rock and sand, and doing all they can to cling on to a way of life that has become increasingly under threat due to the settlers. Early in June myself and a few of my ecumenical clergy colleagues visited the Bedouin village of Khan Al-Ahmer, which is fighting for survival after the Israeli Supreme court decreed that the State can destroy their village and take over their land.

(You can read more about this here:

https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20180527_khan_al_ahmar_ruling)

This is part of a long-term policy that Israel has been pursuing in the Occupied Territories including East Jerusalem, which aims to seize more and more land and resources from the Palestinians. Because Israel controls the natural resources in the West Bank, it ensures that electricity and water are supplied in abundance to the illegal settlements, whilst the Bedouin communities have to make do with what they can generate through solar panels, and need to buy water in (which costs considerably more because of transportation costs). Sometimes the army will come and destroy the solar panels, in an attempt to make life there so unbearable that people begin to leave of their own volition. The community of Khan Al Ahmer is now in fear that the bulldozers will arrive any night, and begin to demolish what little they have.

For a nation that prides itself on being 'the only democracy in the Middle East', this is a real indictment. Of course, Israeli society is no monolith, and there are many Israeli organisations and Jewish individuals who are strongly opposed to what their government is doing. Organisations such as B'TSELEM and Rabbis for Human Rights campaign tirelessly to hold their government to account, and engage in far-reaching advocacy in an attempt to end the military occupation. But the Israeli government is not in the mood for listening, and emboldened by a Trump administration in the White House, they are continuing down a dangerous road, that is not only profoundly unfair for the Palestinians, but which is not in the long term security interests of Israel as a nation. If you

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deprive a people of land, natural resources and hope, you create a situation of despair, which potentially could lead to people engaging in desperate acts, when all legal channels have been exhausted.

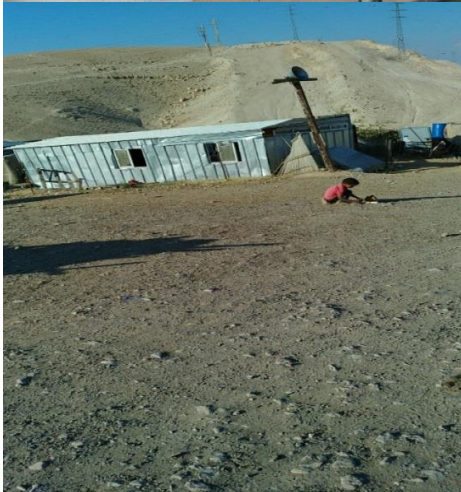
During our visit we met with a group of Jewish organisations who had come to Khan Al-Ahmer to show their solidarity and support for the Bedouin community, but one could not help thinking that the threatened demolition will go ahead regardless.

The community of Khan Al-Ahmer is famous for its 'Rubber-tyre School' which was built out of used car tyres, and serves as a vital educational centre for over 100 Bedouin villagers from nearby communities. If you look closely at the picture below, you will notice how the wall is made out of tyres.

(You can read more about it here: <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/rubber-tyre-school>)



When we visited in the community in early June 2018, we sat with one of the village leaders, and listened to his fear about losing everything. We asked what we could do as a church, he said that they needed basic supplies of food and water, as soon the village would be declared a military zone and completely cut off, in advance of it being demolished.



In response to what we heard, I put out a message to our congregation of St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias (in addition to other churches and contacts out here), and the response was very good. We were able to deliver a considerable consignment of supplies in the space of only a few days, and the village was deeply grateful. This just represents a drop in the ocean, but it is something that the Church will continue to do as the need arises.

As I walked down the dusty path to leave, smiling children waved as they played barefoot on the rocky soil. This is a community that is living on the very edge, and it needs all the support it can get, both from those of us who are here who can lend practical support, but also those of you abroad who can draw awareness to their plight. For those interested in following this more closely please see:

<http://www.jahalin.org/tag/khan-al-ahmar/>



A few days later, I was headed in the opposite direction, driving south into the Hebron hills with my wife Annette and my three youngest children. We had been invited by some Bedouin friends to share in an 'Iftar' meal (the evening meal that is served at sundown during Ramadan). The community of Um Al Khair is another front line community. In fact, this community of ramshackle shanty houses is right outside the perimeter fence of the illegal Israeli settlement of Karmel. You can see in the picture below the settlement houses in the background, and the tents where the Bedouins live in the foreground.

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Um Al Khair has already lived through several nightmares, as Israeli forces have razed homes to the ground, and demolished a community centre and children's playground.

Please see: <https://palsolidarity.org/2016/04/house-demolitions-in-um-al-khair-leaving-children-homeless/>

When we arrived we were given the warmest of welcomes, and our children were soon running around with the Bedouin children, playing amongst the rock and climbing frames in this scorched and barren landscape.



Annette was soon putting her newly learned Arabic to the test, and able to assist medically with some of the residents, when they heard she was a doctor.

The community of Um Al Khair welcomed us with open arms, as we sat down with them to listen to their stories, and to think about how we can help, both as a church and a family, whilst we live in this conflicted land.

One of the things they urgently need is to help build their children's playground, and provide a roof to shelter it from the sun. In the summer months the temperatures soar, and there is no natural shade, no running water, and nowhere for the children to play. The Israeli state does not allow them to build or have water or electricity supplied to them, even though just over the fence new settler homes are being constructed, with well-watered gardens whilst their impoverished neighbours have to buy their water in at a very high cost which is transported in on a truck.



One of the things that my friend Aziz said to me, was that whilst they have had numerous visits from international delegations supportive of their cause, this is the first time that international children have come to the village, let alone played with their children. He told me how much this meant to them, and by the end of the evening my children did not want to leave.

In the midst of such a challenging situation, there was so much joy that evening, watching the children play, listening to their stories, and sharing such a special meal, cooked during their holy month of Ramadan. It was a real privilege to be there, and we felt enveloped by the love and generosity of their welcome.



This community is trying to do all it can to survive against the odds, and in the summer it will be running a summer camp in the prefabricated community centre and skeleton playground in the picture below. With no running water, no shade from the scorching sun, no greenery and very limited resources, it is deeply humbling to witness their plight.

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We all came away from Um Al Khair deeply moved by what we saw, and wanting to do more to support them in friendship and solidarity in the months and years ahead. I was reminded of the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (St Matthew 5:5) 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'. How can we help as a church, to make the little earth they have more sustainable for those living there? How can we support them, as they seek to run a summer camp and set up a kindergarten, so that the children can enjoy benefit from recreational and educational activities, shaded from the intense heat of the sun?

I strongly believe that the mission of the Church of Scotland here in Israel and Palestine needs to reach out to the most marginalised communities here, who are living on the edge.



As we left, I was reminded of the words of Oscar Romero, bishop in San Salvador during the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s:

'When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.' He went on to say that 'Peace is the product of justice and love'.

May the God of peace and non-violence stir our hearts in compassion & generosity, as we seek to build His kingdom of love and justice, in a place where structural political injustice propped up by military might, condemns so many to living as refugees in their own land.

Thank you for your ongoing prayerful support for the Church of Scotland's mission here. It is so deeply appreciated.

John

