

Pilgrims of Ibillin Executive Director Report

From April 2023 Visit with Peace Partners

Seraj Libraries and Cultural Centers

My first partner meeting was with Laurie, Seraj ED, and George who oversees [the Birzeit Library and Cultural Center](#). We toured the incredibly beautifully remodeled home as Laurie filled me in on how they obtained the building and all the work that went into transforming it.

The Center is very close to Birzeit University and many students like to use the space to study and hang-out with friends. It's a much beloved and well-used addition to the Birzeit community.

Laurie showed me the shelves of books that were purchased with our most recent grant.

I came away with a renewed appreciation for the special warm and welcoming center that Seraj has created to serve the community that otherwise has nothing remotely close to it to offer.



Laurie and Essrea in Birzeit Library

Diyar Girls Football (Soccer) Program

Next I traveled to Bethlehem and checked into Mary's House, a convent in the heart of the Old City, where I love to stay when in Bethlehem, the nuns keep the space spotless, and are a delight to spend time with.

From there I went to visit the girls during their football practice, on Dar al Kalima's campus.

One of the players was injured and sitting on the bleachers so I struck up a conversation to ask her about the program and herself. She's 14, a freshman in high school, and already has a map in mind for her future study at a university in the US — and how she will obtain scholarships to make her dreams come true. Clearly, a driven and motivated young woman!

She absolutely adores the football program and Coach Farah (he has led the team to five national titles in the past seven years, and the last four in a row). She feels so lucky to have him as a coach — he's really skilled at bringing out the best in each girl. Being able to play on the

team, she says, helps build confidence and gives her a healthy outlet for her frustrations about the restrictions, humiliations, and horrors of life under occupation.



Diyar Girls Football Practice

Along those lines, she explained to us how careful she must be if she wants any chance to achieve her goals in life — she cannot post anything on social media or be outspoken in any way about what life is like in Palestine. If she is stopped at a checkpoint they will check her social media accounts and anything that can be construed as negative against Israel or favorable towards Hamas will land her in a prison cell and destroy her future.

We must be her (and Palestinians broadly) mouthpiece — we can speak freely, she is not allowed. We heard this same sentiment repeatedly throughout our visit.

Wi'am: The Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center

The next day we joined Usama, Zoughbi, and Wi'am's staff for lunch. They had just returned from a peer-mediation training they offered to Christian middle school students in Bethlehem.

We learned from them how things have grown so very difficult since October — unemployment has multiplied, prices too — four to ten times what things cost a year ago. And the need for their services is much more. Tension throughout the community has increased, leading to greater demand for conflict resolution support. Poverty has grown, and Wi'am has responded by providing food baskets to the neediest families. They tell me that they do what they can but it's not enough.

They also explained how the community of Bethlehem is hurting so much because most outside aid goes to Refugee Camps and Gaza (understandably so), but NGOs in the cities in the West Bank themselves do not receive much help. I asked about sister (twin) city relationships — knowing that Bethlehem has somewhere around 100 'twins' around the world — but appar-

ently these relationships are municipality to municipality and the benefits don't really trickle down to the people.



Lunch w/ Wi'am Staff

The mood overall in Bethlehem is quite heavy, people struggle that harsh injustices are on full display for the world to see and Western governments support horrific injustices against the people of Gaza and the West Bank, too. In general, people we met struggle to feel any sense of hope or optimism given the extraordinary difficulties they face for the foreseeable future and so much uncertainty of where this current military onslaught is going.

We heard repeatedly how Palestinians can't think about the future. There are just too many unknowns and too much darkness on the horizon, it's too painful to contemplate. They can only deal with the day-to-day. They don't know if there will even be a tomorrow.

We did our best to share care and concern for their well-being (and all Palestinians) on behalf of our many thousands of supporters. We let them know that public sentiment in the US is changing rapidly with massive protests and student encampments — not only across the US but around the world (which of course they are aware of). We all hope and pray that it will lead to some changes at the level of governments and politics, inshah'allah!



Esrea and Zoughbi in Wi'am Garden

Hope School - Dr. Khader

Next we stopped by Hope School and Dr. Khader shared with us a brief overview of Hope School and the profound growth that the school has seen in the past 5-8 years.

He shared about the success of the newest program for students with special needs (that Pilgrims has partially funded) and the growing demand from across the community for the ability to educate students who are neurodivergent (extremely rare in Palestinian education systems).

Hope School has trained staff who not only educate but also provide social and emotional support for students who struggle in traditional settings.

We were fortunate to arrive on a special day when circus performers from Jerusalem came to offer an Easter celebration for Hope School students — you can see a brief clip [here](#).



Burke, Essrea, Dr. Khader Hope School Director



Easter Celebration for Hope School Students

Zababdeh - Father Firas

Next stop was an overnight visit to Father Firas in Zababdeh.

Abouna Firas welcomed us warmly and shared his heart. He wanted us to feel that we are at home with his family.

Zababdeh is a quiet and beautiful place where a Christian community continues living in the north of Palestine.

Abouna has many stories to tell us about his ministry and how he focuses on re-building the community with love, courage and building bridges.

He is inspired by Abuna Elias Chacour's vision to help and support the community both spirituality and with other needs.

He does so much with so little. He is dedicated to the success of his students and he personally sacrifices in order to help as many students as he can with scholarships (via grants from Pilgrims of Ibillin) to attend the Catholic school.

In order to help more students he created work projects to create work for people in his community. The projects generate income that is used to help students upon graduation from the Catholic school to continue their education.

Abouna shared with us about his sincere delight in welcoming visitors from around the world, and that since Coronavirus these groups have not returned to Zababdeh, and he express his hope to welcome visitors and volunteer groups again soon, inshah'allah (God willing).

He showed us damage that significant rainfall this past winter has caused in his home — the roof leaks and water entered causing electrical damage and mold to grow on many of the walls (he lives in a stone brick home).

He needs funds and more support. I brainstormed with him some ideas on how he could raise more funds to complete the many projects to keep his church in good shape (fix the roof and many basic upkeep needs) and protect it, by building a wall, from youth fighting with IOF when they invade Zababdeh, which is not uncommon.



Abouna Firas with young student

We also toured the school, a Latin Patriarchate school, that receives funding from its diocese and, therefore, is in really good shape compared to Abouna Firas's church. We attended a liturgy service there with packed pews, beautiful song and ritual, the meaning of which was lost, being in Arabic, but quite touching nonetheless.

Abouna shared about the significant challenges he faces....but ultimately he returns to hope and trust that God will provide.

Border Crossing

From Zababdeh we crossed the border between the West Bank and Israel and were met with incredibly unkind, gruff 'barks' from border security people who seemed conditioned to behave as though anyone coming through the labyrinthine massive steel cage-like structure had to be sub-human and thus deserving of no respect or warmth, whatsoever.

My heart ached for those who encounter this behavior, and likely far worse, on a daily basis (while almost all permits to enter Israel were canceled as of October, there are a certain number, in the hundreds, who have been granted these permits and do work in Israel).

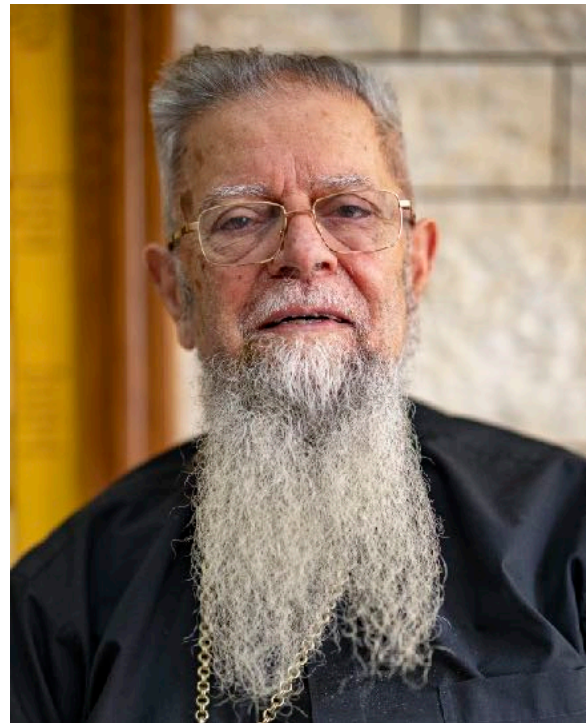
I felt profound sadness for the border security people who have hardened their hearts so thoroughly that they have forsaken their own humanity and demean themselves on a daily basis.

Mar Elias Educational Institute (MEEI) and Abuna

Our first evening in I'billin, we had dinner with Abuna, Nawar, Emil, and Fr. Moudar at the MEEI Guest House.

Abuna had just returned from Lebanon and came directly to dinner upon arrival. He left Beirut that morning at 6am and it took a full 12 hours to arrive in I'billin (a trip that would take 2½ hours if there were diplomatic relations between Israel and Lebanon). Even with the full day of travel, he was in good spirits and delighted to have visitors.

We were not the first visitors since October, but we were the second. A group of Palestinian Christians from northern Galilee had been present the week prior. Nonetheless the Guest



Abuna



Pilgrims of Ibillin



Emil

connection to the school and to work together as partners.

We spent the next few days visiting all the schools that make up MEEI - the high school, junior high, elementary, and nursery. We visited the newly renovated library and met the librarians.

We met with Elias A.G., principal of the high school and Victor, the newly promoted vice principal of the high school. We met with Johaina, principal of the junior high and elementary schools, and Rania, a high school math teacher and future leader at MEEI.

We stopped in several classrooms and engaged with students who loved having visitors and a chance to practice their English.

We spoke with Jewish computer science teacher, Shosh, who shared with us about her sons who were both deployed in Gaza and how worried she was for their welfare, but fortunately they have come home safely. We talked about MEEI's desire to hire more Jewish teachers but the challenge is the language — almost no Jewish Israelis speak Arabic (while the opposite is true of Palestinian Israelis — almost all not only speak Arabic and Hebrew but English too).

We also met with several members of the Amuta during our stay and learned from them that the Latin Patriarchate just announced two days prior that they were forced to close the doors

House was completely empty for our stay. Bedea (the chef) was quite happy to have guests.

Abuna expressed his excitement to come to the US in October, to see many old friends once again, and we discussed details of his visit.

He also mentioned several times over the course of my visit how much he would like the Pilgrims' Board to reschedule our in-person board meeting in I'billin. He feels strongly that this is the best way to deepen our



Johaina, Principal Elementary and Jr High

Pilgrims of Ibillin



The Nursery

of a school in East Jerusalem due to the funding cuts affecting all Christian schools in Israel.

We talked about MEEI's vast alumni network and the need to tap into this source of potential funding - given how many of their graduates have gone on to become quite successful in their chosen fields. How can they afford to take this on? At the same time, how can they not afford to engage their alumni community?

We learned that the newly elected Mayor of I'billin is an MEEI graduate and quite favorable toward MEEI, which the previous mayor was not. The previous mayor was demanding all sorts of property tax payments that by law were not required of schools, but he was demanding them nonetheless. MEEI leadership are very hopeful

that this new mayor will drop this demand (currently the dispute is going through the courts which is costly in terms of finances and staff-time). That said they are aware that any elected official encounters all sorts of outside pressures that force their hands, and this may happen even though the Mayor is quite supportive of MEEI personally.



MS and HS students



Pilgrims of Ibillin

Fr. Moudar, Chair of the Amuta's General Counsel (like an Executive Committee), had looked very closely at their financials and discovered that the shortfall actually amounts to a 45% deficit in funding — in other words, currently they receive 55% of what the Ministry of Education provided for salaries even a year prior. Even then, the funding was just for salaries — it did not provide for any extras such as counseling (the need for which has increased tremendously since October — behavior challenges in the classrooms have escalated), maintenance, field trips, and so much more.

Abuna's response to the severe budget shortfall was, "Well, it's a good challenge for us, isn't it?" (With a big smile)

Despite all this, MEEI remains a very special and unique place with an incredible team of faculty who bring their hearts and give 110% each day to students. I was so very impressed by the quality of staff, students, administrators, faculty, and leadership that have amassed to make



MS Students

MEEI a treasure in the Galilee that hopefully can survive for decades into the future!