

Witness to oppression

Chicago volunteer Joyce Cassel talks about her recent experiences in Palestine.



Israeli authorities demolish a Palestinian home in Al Isawiya.

Joyce Cassel, a long-time volunteer with AFSC in Chicago, was invited to participate in the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) doing advocacy work for the office and being a member of the East Jerusalem team. (There are six teams located in the West Bank.) Joyce served from October 13, 2019 – January 3, 2020 and shares her experiences in this interview.

What did you do and what did you see?

The main responsibility of the East Jerusalem team is the Old City and the neighborhoods of Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah, Isawiya, and the Bedouin communities. For my advocacy work, I spent time in the South Hebron Hills, the Jordan Valley and Al-Khalil (Hebron). I also developed two infographics on the advocacy work of EAPPI.

The UN [reports](#) that the number of Israeli demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian homes in the Occupied West Bank increased 45% in 2019. What did you witness there?

Our team of volunteers were given Nokia phones so that whenever there was a home demolition in our area, we received a text message from UNOCHA (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). It was a priority for us to go to those home demolitions. to be a witness and document what occurred. We usually went out once a week, though sometimes we observed up to three or even four demolitions in a week.

Part of the program work includes reporting to Non-Governmental Organizations. We wrote up reports of what we witnessed and submitted them to the UN and NGOs ranging from Palestinian advocacy groups to international or Israeli human rights groups.



The demolition of a newly built Bedouin home

One of the forms of demolitions the Israeli authorities are doing now in the Bedouin communities is only taking the sides and roof of the house. They come with 50-75 men and take the house apart and cart it off in trucks. What's left standing is just the insides of the house with the furniture. This creates a very stark picture of the occupation and its effect on Palestinians.

Why has the number of home demolitions gone up so drastically?

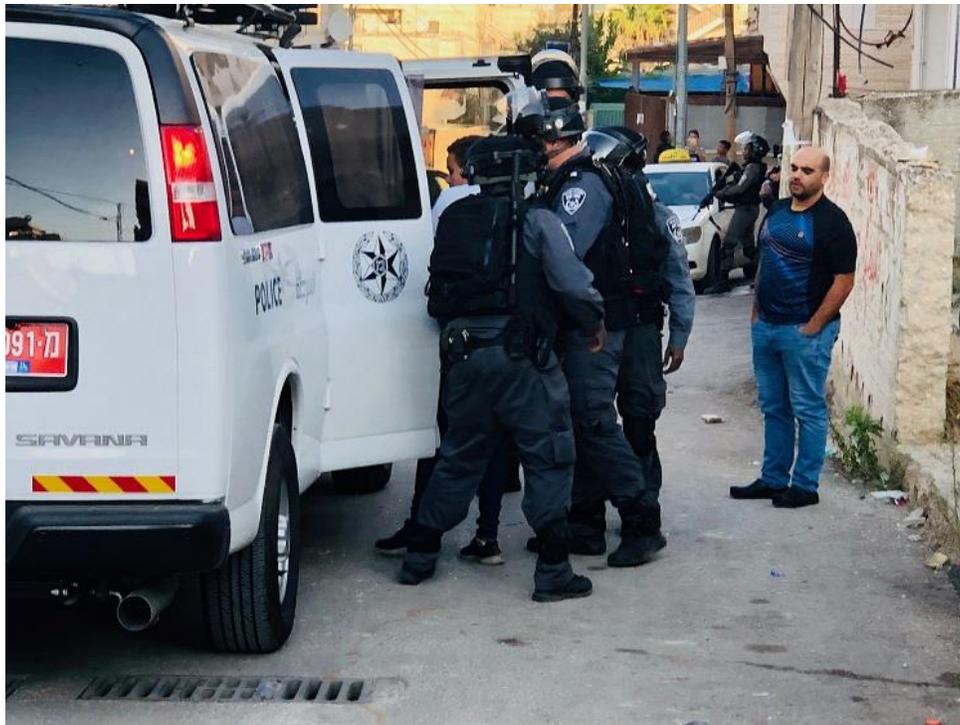
The people we spoke with feel as if the Trump administration's talk about annexing the Jordan Valley and actually moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv (thus overriding Palestinian claims to Jerusalem as their capital) has given a green light to Netanyahu's government to move ahead with expanding Israeli control and settlement colonies while making life for Palestinians intolerable. Palestinians we met feel that no one is able to stop the Israeli government's expansionist plans.

I was at B'Tselem's 30th anniversary event, and the head of the organization said, "There's no piece of land that Israel cannot take."

What are Palestinians trying to do to stop or at least slow these demolitions?

As an example, I'll talk about what I witnessed in the Bedouin community. One of the problems they face is that Israeli authorities fly drones over the Bedouin communities regularly. If they see anyone working on a structure, the civil administration will come and take pictures; within a few weeks, the structure is demolished. Drones have really enabled Israeli authorities to keep control of these areas.

Palestinians are very resilient, but tremendous pressure is made to get them to leave the community of Silwan, which is just outside of Jerusalem's Dung Gate in the Old City. Israel very much wants to expand the City of David Park and take over that area.



Israeli police arrest a young Palestinian in Isawiya.

They have various techniques of pressuring the Palestinian community there, but one tactic is to detain children. To get their children released, families have to go and pay a fine. A couple weeks later, the children are detained again. The question is, how long can these families afford to keep bailing out their children? By going after the children, the Israeli authorities put pressure on the parents. But the folks I spoke with said that this is our home and we are here to stay.

In Sheik Jarrah, Mohammed Sabah has been challenging his eviction notice since 2000. He will be in court again next month. Courts are one of the major ways Palestinians are able to resist injustice, but it's expensive. Many believe that the Israeli government hopes to take control of the whole area from Silwan to Isawiya, convert it into a park and build Israeli citizen apartments.

The Palestinian community's problems in Isawiya escalated in June 2019 when Israeli soldiers killed a young Palestinian man there. Since then, there have been night raids, nighttime sound bombs and tear gas shot in the community. Sometimes Israeli authorities even turn off the electricity and then arrest people in their homes. Many times, people are arrested and released the next day after they pay a fine. They're told that if they are caught again doing any type of protest or demonstration against the state of Israel, they will be removed to the West Bank.

Just living in these conditions is resistance by the Palestinians. Their willingness to continue with everyday life under occupation is important. The Palestinians welcomed us into their communities and homes. Our team would provide protective presence for school children three times a week in Isawiya, once in the morning and twice after school.



Al Isawiya Girls School rally to end violence against women

The girls' school of 800 students had quite a rally one day. The students had worked during the morning learning about the prevention of violence against women. Then they had a large rally during the last hour of the school day calling for an end violence against women. It was a joyous event, and the girls were very involved. The community tries hard to create a safe atmosphere for their children, but it's hard.

Regarding these reports you sent to the UN and other NGOs, is there any hope that international pressure could help this situation?

That's the hope people express to us. That's what they tell us all the time, especially to me as a US citizen. I was with people from Norway, Sweden and Ireland. But especially to me, they would say, "You need to go home and tell people what's happening to us here and rally them to do something."

How are you sharing about your experiences?

One of the things I'll be doing is preparing written material for EAPPI. For example, in each community, Palestinians face different sorts of pressures. In the South Hebron Hills, the Israeli government is trying to connect and expand the Israeli settlements. They set up "outposts" or little settlements of maybe one or two people. And then they add animals – goats, sheep and cows – requiring a larger area, so they keep expanding in that way.

I have heard from numerous people that the goal of the Israeli government is to move Palestinians into Area A from Areas B and C. Areas B and C would then come under Israeli control.

The Israeli newspaper [Haaretz](#) recently reported that Benny Gantz, the "alternative" to Bibi Netanyahu in the upcoming Israeli elections, wants to annex the Jordan Valley. Palestinians I talked to say it's already annexed. It's just not formally done, but the Israeli military has control.

Is there anything else about your experience you'd like to share?

Israeli settlers want to obtain more control over the two major mosques in Palestine, Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and El Ibrahimi in Hebron. In Jerusalem, usually each week, Israeli settlers will come, escorted by the Israeli Army, and harass Palestinians who are on the grounds of the mosque. The Palestinian community has responded by organizing large numbers of people to be present on Fridays. I assume it's continuing. About 50,000 people come for Friday noon prayers to say that this is our place, the whole mosque ground is ours, and we feel the presence of our religion here.



Joyce Cassel serves as a protective presence at Al Aqsa mosque.

In al-Khalil (Hebron), the Palestinian community has come together in support of the significance of El Ibrahimi Mosque for their faith. The major Al Khalil/Hebron families have hired buses to pick up people and bring them early in the morning to the El Ibrahimi mosque because it's easier to get through the checkpoints as there is less security at that time. The families provide food for people who come early in the morning for worship. About 150 young Palestinian men provide security for the people worshipping. Because of the large number that come, they can't all fit in the mosque – some are inside, some are outside.

These are two places where resistance is very strong.

Thank you for sharing all this. How long have you been volunteering with AFSC?

Michael McConnell [Former AFSC Great Lakes/Midwest Regional Director] invited me to be involved in 2002 with Eyes Wide Open. We did a briefing at Northwestern University on the Iraq War.

I know that your husband, John, is also very involved in work for Palestinian human rights. Are you Quakers?

No, we're Church of the Brethren. John co-chairs the [Seraj Library Project](#), which helps develop libraries and civic education programs in rural Palestinian villages.

One final question: What motivates you to do the work you do?

That's a good question. I care about what's happening over there. It feels so unfair and wrong. The more I can learn about it from being present and listening, the more I feel I can help people understand the Palestinian perspective. I've been fortunate to go there three times with EAPPI, and I was there last year with [Christian Peacemaker Teams](#). I feel like if I can make it safe for one person each day, then that's good, and our presence there matters.

I was pleased to help develop the [No Way to Treat a Child campaign](#). I had initial conversations with staff at Defense for Children International Palestine in Hebron and then in the U.S. about how to help others see the impact of the occupation on children; from there, things took off. You never know when something you do can make a difference. We now have members of Congress educated about the experience of Palestinian children living under military occupation, thanks to the campaign.

P.S. Rep. Ro Khanna, Rep. Anna Eshoo, and Rep. Steve Cohen have circulated this [Dear Colleague letter](#) to US Secretary of State Pompeo about opposing home demolitions. The deadline for signatures is January 29; as of January 28, it has 59 signers.