



Together for Peace

Henry Longbottom reflects on his experience of a CMS placement in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Satisfaction is rarely experienced in Israel / Palestine. Things are usually depressing or part of a downward spiral or, at best, double-edged. However, on Saturday, I took part in a demonstration that was not only satisfying but also, I think, made a difference. It was organised by Taa'yush (Arabic for 'coexistence'), a consortium of Arab and Jewish Israeli peace groups.

The aim was to deliver food to the West Bank town of Nablus which has been under continual siege by the Israeli army for over two months.

About 400 of us met on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Carrying placards and tins of baby food, we boarded 10 coaches. I was amazed at the cross-section of protesters: radical keffiyeh-wearing students rubbed shoulders with glamorous, middle-aged Israeli ladies. There were both Arabs and Jews. I even met one elderly but impressively athletic gentleman who had fought for Israel in both the 1948 and 1967 wars. The beleaguered peacenik movement is small but eclectic and very committed.

Forming an impressive convoy, the coaches left for the West Bank. Eventually we got to a village just outside Nablus, which was as far as we got. We were met by soldiers who fired tear gas at us (this is where an onion comes in handy - simply place over your nose and breathe). But the locals came out and joined us so there were about a thousand people in the main street. We had a rally with speeches and handed out the baby food.

It was wonderful to see demonstrators talking with the Palestinians. Many of the young male Palestinians had probably never met a Jew who was not in uniform before. In this conflict, there is so much demonising of the opposition. It is much harder to bomb indiscriminately if you can put a face to the potential victims. An enduring image I have was of a grinning young Palestinian boy who was evidently pleased with his new acquisition of a placard which declared, in Hebrew, 'End the occupation now!'.

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