

Um-al-Kheir Palestinian Bedouin Village Under Siege By IDF

Editor CEC adds a forward: See Tom Compton in group photo (he is the oldest, enthusiastic missionary to this Bedouin village in the sixth photo). When we write about tragedy's like this one we have usually seen it for ourselves, and have come to a conclusion why its happening. Tom is not passing on what someone has reported to him. He witnessed what he calls, "one of the most memorable, non-violent resistance actions taken while in Palestine, as part of the [Holy Land Trust's](#) Iktashef Experience, was the help we gave to the Bedouin village of Um al-Kheir near Hebron in the West Bank of Palestine. One of the participants, Marcus Owtram, describes our actions in this inspiring article." [Ed.-TEC]



The land for the village of Um al-Kheir was purchased in 1965 with 100 camels by Tariq Hathaleen's grandfather. There was no Israeli settlement in this 1969 aerial map. (Photo by Tom Compton)



This 2016 aerial map shows how the illegal Jewish settlement (on the left) is encroaching on Um al-Kheir village and blocking the villagers from easy access to grazing lands for their goats. (Photo by Tom Compton)



Two new friends: Suleiman, the village Patriarch and Tariq Hathaleen, the young village spokesperson. (Photo by AnaMichele Baybak)

[An obligation to the people of Um al-Kheir](#)

Standing in solidarity and not turning back

Editor's Note: This is a reflection by one of Holy Land Trust's past Iktashef coordinators showing the ways in which his experience here gave him a renewed sense of commitment to those living under oppression and violence.

By Marcus Owtram

Parts of me question what right I have as a Brit to march into this space and start criticising the Israeli state (?none?). What am I

currently doing to fight the gross injustices that my own government is perpetrating around the world, not to mention the crimes committed in the past regarding empire and colonialism? I'm sure I will be asked this, and rightly so. But I can't remain silent after returning from the Holy Land a second time. I first came to this region of the world in 2010 essentially as a religious tourist, like so many other Christians. In my time there I never saw nor heard talk of the Palestinians. Maybe a word in passing, a comment, a joke. The West Bank was a scary, dangerous place and to go there we would literally be risking our lives. That was my perception as a 13 year old adolescent.

Seven years later, I find myself having spent a total of 3 months in the West Bank, with frequent stays in Israel. The perception of the West Bank as being a scary place where bad things always happen is now well and truly dispelled in my mind. But also the perception that Palestinians are somehow responsible for the situation that befalls them now.

?Well what about Hamas?

?the reply I can almost bet on when I try and advocate for my Palestinian friends, who seem now more like family. This piece is a collection of thoughts, of observations, of challenges. These are my personal experiences. The goal here is to honestly and humbly describe my most poignant encounter this summer- staying with the Bedouins in the village of Um al-Kheir. I don't claim to be non-biased. I hope to challenge Christians to consider some of the issues I raise here, as I often encounter people in church circles who seem to have some sort of infatuation with the modern, secular nation state of Israel. Indeed I'm sure even now some reading this may be turning uncomfortably in their seats.

I know that my God is a God of justice. He hates inequality and oppression. And I know that when I was staying with the Bedouins in the south Hebron hills, where they were not allowed to build any structures on their own private land, connect to the water or electricity supply, or even have a proper access road, whilst Israelis living in a settlement deemed illegal under international law not 10 meters away enjoyed water, electricity, perfect roads, the protection of the army, 3G?this was not just. This is not what the God of the Nations endorses or condones.

Um al-Kheir



Sunrise at Umm-al-Kheir (Photo by Noah Dunlap)

Um al-Kheir literally translating as 'Mother of Good', this small Palestinian Bedouin village is built on private land, purchased from other local Palestinians living in the nearby town of Yatta. This was after the Bedouins were expelled from the al Arad desert in the 1948 war by Zionist militias. Suleiman (the ancient, feisty leader of the village) personally showed me the ownership deeds to the land upon which Um al-Kheir is built and the surrounding area. The papers bear King Abdullah of Jordan's stamp, as before the 1967 war the West Bank was under Jordanian administration.

On arrival, it was clear to us that these people are poor. A small dirt road connects the village to the main highway. Clothes are torn, the children do not wear shoes. The houses are ramshackle constructions of corrugated iron and other materials that are readily available. Toilets are provided through small, stinking portaloos gifted by the European Union. Wires are exposed, and there is dust everywhere.

Contrast this with the Israeli settlement right next door. The settlement's boundary fence is literally side by side with Um al-Kheir. They are neighbours in the truest sense. The settlement of Carmel was founded in 1981, after an Israeli military installation was used as a pretext to bring Israeli settlers to the area, deep inside the West Bank. Originating as what is known as a Moshav (a type of agricultural settlement with a focus on community labour), it expanded rapidly since its inception and today accommodates a population of over 400 people. It is connected to the network of Israeli water mains and the electricity grid installed especially for settlers. Private (settler only) roads connect Carmel to other (illegally) settled parts of the West Bank and Israel proper. The settlement has full 3G mobile coverage and internet. At a glance, it looks like an affluent suburb of some American city. Luscious greenery everywhere, fruit trees bursting with life, whitewashed homes with red tiled roofs.

The Israeli state has confiscated numerous parts of private land from Um al-Kheir, originally to build the military encampment, and from there allowing the settler movement to develop and cultivate the area into what is now Carmel. The settlement is illegal under international law. It is built on Palestinian land, outside of the international borders of Israel, in an area occupied by the Israeli military. This contradicts Article 49 of the 4th Geneva convention, 1949 (to which Israel is a signatory), regarding the prohibition on transferring elements of the occupier's population into occupied territory and thus changing the demographic make up of the region. Many of these settlements are illegal even under Israeli law, but can be retroactively legalised.

These neighbours are not equals. Whilst the illegal Israeli settlers are connected to ample water supplies (often drawn from aquifers on what is also classified as Palestinian land), the villagers of Um al-Kheir are not allowed to be connected to this water supply. They are living in an area of the Occupied Palestinian Territories where all civil and security affairs are coordinated by the Israeli military (called area C). They are not in an area where the Palestinian Authority can provide water. To see this avoidable poverty side by side with prosperity derived from Israeli government backing and settler movements (with money donated by supporters in the US), made me very angry. It is rather ironic that the chickens being reared in the poultry farm run by the settlers receive more electricity and water than the Bedouins do. These people are being denied the right to live a decent life, not necessarily because they are poor or helpless, but because there is a military occupation that controls every single aspect of their lives.

To try and resolve the water issue, attempts have been made to build wells or have some sort of water purification system with pumps to supply all houses in the village. Since all new structures require a permit from the Israeli military, and since it is nigh on impossible for Palestinians to gain a building permit, all such vital structures have demolition orders. The only other option is to rely on water donations from the Palestinian Authority and aid organisations, or buy water from private companies which is incredibly expensive. While they have one cistern that was present on the land before 1948 (when the modern state of Israel came into being, so cannot be demolished as an 'illegal structure'), it is not good water to drink or wash in. All this while water pipes are laid under Bedouin land to supply the settler's chicken farm next door. They joked to us that they can hear the water rushing to the chickens whilst they sit in the dust.

The Bedouins are prohibited from connecting to the mains grid that the settlers use. Any alternative electricity producing device is classed as an 'illegal structure' because it is built without the elusive building permit, and therefore has a demolition order. Even the solar panels currently used have been classed as illegal structures. It is the same with the shacks they live in. Since they are all built 'illegally' (despite being on privately owned Bedouin land), almost all structures in the village have demolitions orders. Incredibly, even a wood burning stove used for cooking bread has been deemed an illegal structure. Such is the insanity of the project going on here. The idea is to make life so unbearable for the villagers that they leave, allowing the settlers further room to expand. It does not take a genius to work this out, and often settlers will not even deny this. Many of the settlers we spoke to (mainly in Hebron, though those in Gush Etzion and Tekoa expressed similar sentiments), claimed that the land was promised to them by God anyway, and so

really the Palestinians (including Bedouins) have no right to be there.



Volunteers with Holy Land Trust laying new floors for two elderly women in the village. Our work will soon receive demolition orders. (Photo by AnaMichele Baybak)

The villagers are generously offered the the choice to pay for the demolition of their own home or they can let the Israeli military do it at a time and date that is not specified. The army demolition unit could come tomorrow, the week after, next year. There is no certainty in this place. When they do come, it is usually a dawn operation. The inhabitants are awakened by soldiers rapping on the door of the house (or rather a metal shack) with the butt of their machine guns. The head of the household is informed that his house will be demolished. He then has a few minutes to get his family out and salvage as many possessions as he can. The house is demolished, and the army leaves. These people are now homeless, and of course this affects children as much as anyone else. And so the process continues. Even the canvas we slept under, a tarpaulin with poles sunk into concrete, had a demolition order. (Incidentally, many argue that this represents a violation of article 53 of the 4th Geneva convention: 'Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.')



?This is one illegal activity I know I can be truly proud of Tom Compton, 71.

There have been concrete structures and proper houses built by the bedouins in the past. One of our dear friends, Bilal, worked in Israel for five years to earn enough money to build his new wife a concrete house with proper foundations, built of course without a permit. Soon they had a son. Three months later, the Israeli military demolished his house, making Bilal, his wife, and his three month old son homeless. He spoke with pain about the hopelessness he felt. About the sinking feeling of having tried your hardest, but it still not being enough. Of having two people totally dependant on you, and you having failed to provide and protect them. Of course, all this would have been avoided had the Israeli state (as a military occupier) granted him a permit to build on his own

private land. All this whilst the settlement next door continues to grow and grow. No sign of a demolition there. No reliable access to water or electricity, poor sanitation, stinking portable toilets, an inability to build proper houses suitable for raising small children, regular harassment by settlers and the Israeli military. A desperate lack of hope. This was my experience in Um al-Kheir. This is a direct result of the Israeli military occupation and settler project. We watched videos of the defiant old village elder, Suleiman, being dragged off to Israeli detention again and again, shouting 'God is great and God be praised' after confronting the home demolishers and soldiers. It is shown in this video. He pleaded with us to take photos of the village, of the aerial photographs showing the Israeli land confiscation and settlement expansion over the years. And with everyone we talked to in that village it was the same. Go home and tell your people about us. Do not forget us. And I don't intend to.

Join Holy Land Trust in resisting not only the violence here, but in all systems of oppressions. Join us this winter, Dec 21 through Jan 3, on the Sumud Freedom Tour as we partner with the village of Um al-Khair to re-create a world altogether different than this one, one based in equality and restorative justice. Stand with us in vulnerable co-resistance as we build the sacred community.