

# student caught in West Bank conflict

Photos by: Khalid Taha  
Story by: Khalid Taha

They seemed very interested in my father's name and his religion. I was told that lab tests done on my Neo Citran showed traces of opium. They would allow me to take this medicine into Israel only if I drank some of the powder diluted in cold water to prove it was not laced with opium. I did so. The disregard for my personal belongings and a tiresome three and a half hour security check left me frustrated. When I asked why we were being discriminated against, I was told by the soldier in charge of passport clearance that it was because "you are Arabs and if you don't like the treatment you received go back to Jordan."

The next two weeks were spent meeting and working with students, farmers, refugees in camps, civic leaders and others. On the last day of the work camp I ate a bad hotdog and had decided to leave the farewell party early and get some much needed rest. A few minutes after I had retired to my tent I was startled awake. Before me stood two Israeli soldiers pointing their rifles at me. The plain-clothes detective with them kept asking me if I was an Arab and if I spoke Arabic. By now I could see more soldiers entering the grounds. I was told to get out of my sleeping bag and was led around the corner to join the rest of the international volunteers who were still enjoying the party. I was not allowed to get dressed. Ten uniformed Israeli soldiers and three detectives in civilian clothes entered Bir Zeit University's women's hostel, the living quarters for female international volunteers and the site of the camp's farewell party. The Israelis ignored a Bir Zeit University official's request for the written military order required for military authorities to enter university property. The soldiers searched the dormitory, detained three Palestinian students, and confiscated identity cards from seven others. Two of the three students detained were subsequently released after they were beaten by the soldiers, the third student was last seen in the Rammalah prison. In the course of the raid, Israeli soldiers struck 2 Norwegian women in the face with batons, punched an American woman in the chest and threatened to use tear gas and guns on anyone who protested. The party was surely over....



Police corner demonstrators

The next day, approximately 40 Canadian, American and European volunteers from the camp marched from the Damascus Gate of the 'Old City' to the American Consulate in East Jerusalem to file a formal affidavit and statement with a representative of the United States government. It was planned that we would later split up into smaller groups and file our own complaints with the consular representatives of our different countries. There was no involvement by any Palestinian students in the planning or the demonstration. Outrage and frustration at the events of the previous night led us to independently organize the peaceful demonstration. Carrying placards and singing songs, we stopped in front of the American Consulate while a surprised crowd of tourists and locals began to take notice. We had been in front of the Consulate only a few minutes when Israeli Military personnel showed up. The police already on the scene demanded we disperse.

We argued that, as a group of less than 50 peaceful protestors, we did not require a permit under Israeli law and we had a right to stay. As one of us began reading a statement to the gathering crowd, the police and soldiers began tearing placards from our hands and beating us with batons and rifle butts. They physically moved us further down the street all while beating and pushing us until finally a cloud of tear gas and a spray of rubber bullets caused us to scatter. I ran away from the effects of the tear gas towards the YMCA nearby where some of us had sought safety. A man whose identity I shall never know handed me a piece of onion which he said would eliminate the burning sensation in my eyes and nose. Before I reached the steps of the Y I was grabbed from behind and I received a blow from a baton that left my shoulder bruised and sore for days. I escaped

the grasp of the policeman before his backup had arrived and outran him into the Y. Inside the scene was chaotic, many of the women crying and all of us trying to shake off the effects of the gas. The director of the Y was outraged at what he had witnessed and scolded the soldiers and police that had now followed us inside. The soldiers grabbed a student from Belgium and beat him severely, 'knocking him to the floor where they handcuffed him and beat him again. They picked him up and dragged him to the entrance where a soldier delivered a blow to his head that left a pool of blood where he fell semi-conscious. The soldiers and police began pointing fingers at all the males they recognized from outside. I escaped the awaiting army outside by exiting the Y via the backdoor after we had turned our T-shirts inside out hoping to disguise ourselves as merely curious onlookers.

In all, six foreign students were arrested, two American, three from Belgium and the last from England. All were detained overnight in Moscovbiyya Prison (the Russian compound) in East Jerusalem and released about 24 hours later. While in prison, all those arrested were threatened with long prison terms if they refused to be fingerprinted and were asked to sign statements in Hebrew which they later learned were confessions. The American woman detained was refused medical treatment when she became violently ill during the night. Later they were freed on the pretext that they leave the country immediately after release.

The Israeli media reaction was as follows: Newspapers covering the story (which are censored by military authorities) called us Palestinian Bir Zeit University students, the T.V. media didn't cover the story except to say "P.B.Z.U. students attacked the consulate." International media who were on the scenes to cover the story about Jewish immigration saw it was a "blatant, unprovoked attack on defenceless peaceful protestors."

I left Israel with no regrets and plan to travel there again in the future. I leave aware that the treatment we received paled in comparison with that of Palestinians arrested and beaten daily under occupation. In conclusion I would like to make it clear that this experience has not left me a bitter man, quite the opposite, I am grateful. I now understand vividly how precious FREEDOM is.



Foreign students protest in Jerusalem

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