

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Two peaceful demonstrations at the Damascus Gate - Old City - East Jerusalem. One was peaceful all the way; the other was interrupted by the Israeli Army and Police. It ended up with young Palestinians being injured and arrested.

Damascus Gate, the main entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem is far more than a passage to the Souk. Its many stone steps invite you to sit down, eat a falafel, drink coffee, rest or just watch the world go by. Lots of merchants have set up their stalls and invite you with loud shouts to buy their goods. It is a place where people meet for a chat or catch up on the latest gossip.



Palestinian women celebrate International Women's Day. (Photo: Barbara Cryer)

The entrance to the Damascus Gate resembles an amphitheatre, a backdrop, it provides an ideal place to sing, dance or have a peaceful demonstration. On 10 March, a group of Palestinian women attracted our attention by their singing, hand clapping and live music. They invited us to join in and we gladly accepted. We learned that this was their way of celebrating International Women's Day. The demonstration was intended to pass on old traditional wedding songs to the younger generation, in order to remember and preserve Palestinian identity and culture. Quite a number of men watched and listened to the women's singing. A group of young men and women danced to the old tunes. Delicious food was served to everybody who was interested to join in the celebration. My EA colleague Natasha and I talked with the women and were invited to meet up in their office to learn more about their work in the Old City. Thankfully, although present throughout, neither the Israeli Army nor the Police intervened and we all left afterwards with smiles and full bellies!



Explaining the work of EAPPI to a boy from East Jerusalem. (Photo: Barbara Cryer)

The next day, towards evening, I sat down on the steps of Damascus Gate for a quick break. Three young men asked me to take a photo of them with their iPhone. One of them turned out to be an actor at the National Palestinian Theatre. When they learned that EAs work together with the Wadhi Hilweh Center in Silwan and that we knew people in common, they told me that there would be a demonstration at 6 pm. I went home to get my colleagues and upon arriving at the Damascus Gate, a peaceful demonstration had begun. During the previous week, six Palestinian people had been killed by the Israeli Army and these young people just wanted to express their disapproval. They did this in a peaceful way, by chanting and holding up Palestinian flags. As the group started to walk away from the Damascus Gate, the Israeli Army and Police arrived in great numbers and within seconds threw sound bombs and fired tear gas into the crowd. The young people attempted to flee the scene as quickly as possible.

We were horrified to witness how police and soldiers hit two young men with extreme brutality. The young men were totally powerless and screaming in pain, as six or seven soldiers beat one and then the other, blind folded them and pushed them into two separate Police cars. Some of the detained were obviously under the age of 18 years. We later learned that further participants were injured, including a paramedic.

**Many young people that are arrested in East Jerusalem are under the age of 18. They are still children.** In Palestine hundreds of children are arrested every year and put into detention in violation of Israeli and International law. What happens to these children in detention is described and illustrated in an exhibition called [Room No.4](#). This exhibition is based on a report that collects interviews with 30 children from Silwan (East Jerusalem), aged between 7 to 17 years old , who were arrested and detained.

Why does the Israeli Army and Police not respect freedom of expression, a human right that Israel as a democracy should grant to all of its citizens? And why have the child arrests increased 80% in January and February 2014?

In every culture, children are the most precious, but also the most vulnerable members of society. They are the future and bring hope for change. Their parents' desire is to pass on values such as love and respect. In arresting and mistreating children, the Israeli Army hurts the Palestinian people at the very core of their being.

Barbara Cryer, March 2014, Jerusalem

Short video of Army/Police intervention at Damascus Gate on 11 March 2014:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10152032373513528&set=vb.303072763527&type=2&theater>

I have been sent to Palestine and Israel by HEKS-EPER and Peace Watch Switzerland as Human Rights Observer in the frame of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The opinions expressed here are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the sending organizations. If you like to publish the information contained in this article or disseminate it further, please first contact the EAPPI Communication Officer [eappi.communications@gmail.com](mailto:eappi.communications@gmail.com) or Peace Watch Switzerland [palestine@peacewatch.ch](mailto:palestine@peacewatch.ch)

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