

Just an ordinary day in Jerusalem

Alison MacTier, Communications Resources Co-ordinator for BibleLands, describes the reality of travelling to school in this divided city



Children crossing roadblocks on their way to school in Jerusalem

Children often arrive at school exhausted and traumatised, needing time to unburden their experience before starting lessons

The school run

How many of us have experienced the frustrations of early morning rush-hour delays on the roads or public transport – causing stress levels to soar, plans to be changed and, at worst, the whole day to be disrupted?

For those living in and around Jerusalem, travel restrictions caused by the separation wall and checkpoints mean that long, stressful and sometimes impossible journeys to and from places of work or school are now a part of ordinary everyday life. Teachers and their pupils set out in the very early hours of the morning, not knowing what obstacles they will face along the way. Children often arrive at school exhausted and traumatised, needing time to unburden their experience before starting lessons, only to face the same difficulties on their way home.

Rawdat El-Zuhur is a Christian-run primary school in the heart of East Jerusalem, supported by BibleLands. Around 280 mainly Muslim children from very poor backgrounds attend. Founded over 50 years ago as a home for destitute girls, the school today offers students a very broad education, with a particular emphasis on Music, Art, Drama and Dance. Holistic in approach, it also provides extra-curricular activities to the children and support for their families to help them cope in the current situation.



The entrance to Rawdat El-Zuhur, the school name means 'Garden of Flowers' and was chosen by its founder, Elizabeth Nazir, to reflect a spirit of joy and love



An art class at Rawdat El-Zuhur. Art, Music, Dance and Drama are particularly encouraged at the school



Alison MacTier and Salwa Zananiri, Principal of Rawdat El-Zuhur School



One of the gates to the separation wall in Jerusalem

Principal of the school, Salwa Zananiri, recently sent BibleLands two accounts of the typical experiences of staff and children on their early morning journey to school.

Maryam's story

Maryam is a Science teacher at Rawdat El-Zuhur and lives in Bethany village, just a few miles outside Jerusalem. A journey that would take fifteen minutes in normal conditions can take hours in the present situation. Maryam lives near her colleague Tania and together they set out on a journey that will be at best inconvenient and, at worst, a test of mental and physical stamina.

One morning in May, Maryam and Tania left home at 6.30am. At the gates of the separation wall they were stopped by the soldiers, who would not let them pass even when, in desperation, the women pleaded that they were on their way to hospital.

The friends then hid in a strangers' house for a while, where they looked for another way through the wall. Having found a gap in this 8-metre high barrier, they attempted to squeeze through it but were again unsuccessful. Still determined, they tried to cross a security fence. This proved to be too high for the women and eventually a young man helped to lift them over to the other side, causing them considerable embarrassment and discomfort, as one of them injured her leg, while the other tore her clothes.

A simple journey previously taking five minutes by foot now takes at least an hour by minibus

Such was Maryam and Tania's determination to reach the school that they continued their journey undaunted. Having crossed the fence, the women found themselves at the top of a steep hill, which they had to slide down, among the dust, stones and sewage water. Finally, when this long ordeal seemed to be over, they came face-to-face with the soldiers, who promptly took them by jeep to the police headquarters, where they were held until 10.30am. Humiliated, exhausted and frustrated by their journey, both women returned home in tears, unable to get to school that day.

Information

BibleLands is a non-denominational Christian charity working in partnership with over 50 Christian-led Projects in Lebanon, Egypt, and Israel and the Occupied Territories. Focusing particularly on the vulnerable and disadvantaged, BibleLands supports projects working in six key areas:

In education, supporting over 20 Christian schools and colleges for disadvantaged children. With young adults, providing vocational training and rehabilitation facilities. For those who live in poverty and deprived circumstances, providing social care and practical self-help programmes. In medical care, supporting hospitals, health centres and outreach clinics. For children and young people with disabilities, providing education and specialist training. For refugees still flooding into Egypt, having lost homes and all possessions, supporting projects providing emergency food, health care, education and training.

This work is all funded through public donation. BibleLands also offers opportunities for short-term volunteering and pilgrimages to the lands of the Bible. For more details, please visit: www.biblelands.org.uk



Lina's story

Children at the school experience similar difficulties. One morning, six-year-old Lina arrived at the school late and traumatised by the journey. She had begged her father to find a way to the school so that she wouldn't miss the Story Telling Week



Children (with stickers on their foreheads) are encouraged to learn and laugh as they play



A reading class at Rawdat El-Zuhur

after their usual route was blocked at two checkpoints. Soon after Lina finally arrived at school, she complained of severe stomach pains and she was taken to hospital. The medical staff there diagnosed stress as the cause of her temporary illness. Sadly, stories like these are typical of children and their teachers across Israel and the Occupied Territories.

Children and staff from the Helen Keller Centre for the Visually Impaired, also in Jerusalem, have faced severe disruption in their daily journey for several years. A checkpoint that was placed directly outside the Centre's front gate means that a simple journey previously taking five minutes by foot now takes at least an hour by minibus. Some blind and visually impaired children have to find their way around concrete 'security barriers' to get to school. To make matters worse, a further barrier has now been added, meaning that children, parents and staff may spend literally hours trying to find a way in. For some children living outside Jerusalem, travel to the Centre is now impossible and they have to stay at home, missing the education and care that this unique facility offers.

In a situation that shows no sign of improvement, Rawdat El-Zuhur, The Helen Keller Centre and other schools and educational centres, supported by BibleLands, continue their work in the face of adversity and bring hope and encouragement to a desperate situation. Never has it been so critical to offer whatever support we can.

■ Alison MacTier

Alison MacTier joined BibleLands in 2003. She previously spent twelve years as an editor in book publishing, mainly in the field of education, before transferring her skills to the charity sector.

Be a part of her future



BibleLands ... working with more than 20 Christian-led schools in the lands of the Bible

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