

Ayed

Education under occupation

Urif Boys' School in Nablus, in the northern West Bank, is well known for its prowess in sports, but ecumenical companions know it for a very different reason. It sits on a hill a few hundred metres below Yitzhar, an Israeli settlement that is well known throughout the West Bank. This is because a number of settlers living there are often violent towards Palestinians in the nearby villages.

In autumn 2018 the headteacher, Ayed, told an EA about a recent incident at the school.



The headteacher of Urif Boys' School, Ayed Qot.
Photo: EAPPI/Philippa



Urif Boys' School playground with Yitzhar settlement above. Photo: EAPPI/EA Philippa

“The boys were in their third lesson when suddenly stones rained on the upper classroom windows. There were around 50 settlers coming down the hill from Yitzhar with stones and sticks. Our boys were screaming and running. We evacuated the school within a few minutes, but a number of students were injured by stones thrown as they tried to get out of the gate.

Then the villagers went up towards the settlers to protect their kids, and some of the older boys went too. Israeli soldiers

were observing the situation, and when they saw the villagers go up the hill they came down. They shot tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition.

Around 15 students were injured – one hit in the arm by a live bullet, the rest hit by stones and rubber bullets. Two teachers were injured by stones as they evacuated the boys from the school. Three villagers were hurt too.”

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Like any teaching professional, as well as thinking about his students' safety, Ayed is concerned about the quality of their education. “After an incident like this, we always have a high rate of absenteeism the following day, and more aggressive behaviour from the boys.”

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Ibrahim

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Like most headteachers, Ibrahim wants the best for his students, even in difficult circumstances. And Burin Secondary School and its students have certainly faced difficulties under the military occupation. The school walls are topped with wire fencing, and an Israeli watchtower stands behind the football field.

The military built the tower in 2015, and you can clearly see it from almost anywhere in the school grounds. The military says it helps to keep control and order in the village, and to protect the Israelis living in settlements on the hills above. For the pupils though, the tower is a constant reminder of the reality of the occupation – the military are always present, even at school.

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Sometimes the soldiers don't stay in the military tower and come to the school instead. One break-time in March 2018, the military came up to the fence separating the field from the tower, pointing their guns at the pupils and intimidating them. When one of the boys threw a stone at them, the soldiers threw tear gas into the school and shot a 13-year-old in the face with a rubber bullet.

The next day, some parents rang the school to say their children were too scared to attend, describing their nightmares and bed-wetting. Although most were able to return the following day, the incident had an impact on their studies. Ibrahim described how students' marks have dropped. Distracted and unable to focus on their lessons, they nervously look outside towards the military tower. “Their mind is outside, not with the teacher”, says Ibrahim.



Ibrahim, headteacher at Burin Secondary School.
Photo: EAPPI/Sophie

Despite a constant military presence, teachers at Burin Secondary School are trying to keep students safe, help them stay positive – and make the most of their education. Ibrahim encourages parents to keep students on their best behaviour and not to behave in any way that could provoke soldiers. He also tries to keep spirits up – as well as the opening of a new music room, the school has recently opened greenhouses, where pupils learn how to grow and tend to vegetables.



A student in a greenhouse at Burin Secondary School.
Photo: EAPPI/EA Jess