

WFWP Women's Peace Meeting.

“The continuing tragedy in the Middle East.”

We had a very large turnout for our last Women's Peace Meeting about the Middle East, reflecting the genuine feelings of compassion and concern for the on-going suffering and uncertainty of the people there, particularly women and children who are so often the victims of conflict. We heard from five main speakers, watched two interesting videos, had a number of valuable contributions during the discussion, and raised money for a WFWP project in Jordan, helping to support refugee families from Syria.



Our first speaker was Batool, a chemical engineering student at Birmingham University, and President of the Islamic Society there. She spoke passionately about the fact that 2017 marked 100 years of occupation for the Palestinian people, whose situation has been out of the main news in recent times. Nevertheless, they continue to suffer both visible and invisible forms of abuse. Various forms of humiliation illustrate the latter, including the common check-point experience, while one of the most visible is the contaminated water supply forced upon the population of Gaza. Batool quoted a figure of 7,000 prisoners held in continuing uncertainty in extremely poor conditions in Israeli prisons, of whom 4,000 are under the age of 15.

We then watched part of an objective, factual documentary about the situation for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, made by a Jewish woman, Anna Baltzer a few years ago. A member of the International Women's Peace Service, she documents a number of examples of human rights abuse, and shows how she herself has been a supporter of non-violent resistance in the West Bank.

A remarkable, short video was then shown about the incredible work of the Parents Circle and Families Forum, Jewish and Palestinian families who have all lost a loved one in the conflict, but who work together in search of a lasting solution to end the violence, and entitled 'Pain is a Power'.

Our second speaker was Angela, a teacher who retired 7 years ago and then attended a Summer School in Bethlehem where she met someone who helped her to set up an organisation which teaches weaving and craft-making skills to Palestinian women. She would like to spend more time with the women, and was also very critical of the use of phosphorus bombs by Israeli forces, having seen the consequences of a resultant contaminated food supply, and the harm done with phosphorus finding its way into peoples' bones.



Next was Asma, a young Syrian woman who arrived in Birmingham about 18 months ago with her family as part of the UK government's scheme to resettle a small number of Syrian refugees. In Syria, her family had everything they needed until the war broke out. Then their happiness, their safety and all trust was taken away from them. All the people wanted was freedom, but the government have killed millions of people. Oil and gas are also at the heart of much of the conflict in Syria and the Middle East. There have been so many human rights violations, with ordinary people unable to protect themselves. Asma remembers air strikes during the holy month of Ramadan, experiencing absolute terror and exhaustion from being unable to sleep. From her bedroom in their 4th floor flat, she heard the smashing of glass, saw doors broken, and heard a woman screaming. She ran out and saw someone's leg lying there, and then the woman screaming hugging her 2 sons close to her. Asma's father tried to help, but the boys died. The woman cried for a whole year, then developed cancer from the pain and trauma, and died. Such indescribable sad, tragic situations. Her family managed to stick together, and made it to Turkey in 2015, where some of the people welcomed them. Then they were able to move to the UK, and Asma has managed to begin studying for her A levels, with the aim of becoming a pharmacist.



Ismat, who does medical legal work for an orthopaedic surgeon, spoke next about the Lady Zainab project, helping families in Syria. She travelled there earlier in 2017, and was struck by a large police presence, and also by the absence of men among the refugees and displaced people. She met many young wives, and heard about the lack of education. Ismat visited a pre-school for very young children, seeing a lot of energy in spite of the lack of resources. Many homes have been destroyed, but with people still living there, trying to simply survive. A lot of children can be seen with no shoes, dirty clothes and faces, and severely lacking in love and care. So much despair, but also the hope that one day the truth will be told as to what actually happened.

Finally Abra, a teaching assistant and recently qualified faith guide in Birmingham, spoke about the horrific Iran Iraq war in the 1980's, and how things have become progressively worse in Iraq. Previously there was no sectarianism, but the war changed everything. She remembered, as a 7-year old girl, the horror of the conflict, with millions of soldiers dying, many of whom were child soldiers. Bodies were often thrown callously on the ground at nearby mosques for all to come and identify. She could remember the ashen face of her mother, searching through around 60 corpses to see if one of them was that of her father, and Abra herself recognising the body of the father of one of her friends, his legs so terribly burned, something she can never forget.



Following our main speakers, and before we opened the floor for discussion, we passed round a donation box and collected about £300 which has been sent to support a WFP project in Jordan, giving help to some of the displaced families from Syria who have found refuge there.

Helga, a wonderful elderly Jewish lady, said very simply “I was also a refugee”, herself having found safety here in the UK when evacuated on one of the last Kindertransport trains from central Europe in 1939. She mentioned all the young Jewish people who do not wish to be part of the conflict, some of whom are put in prison. She read a prayer and quotation about peace, and then reminded us that peace requires sacrifice, in order to build bridges of respect and understanding.



After several other meaningful contributions, we brought the sharing to a close, lit candles, and offered prayers and devotional songs from the different faith traditions present in the room. Some are prepared, and some are spontaneous, and all of them offered with sincere devotion such that a divine presence always manifests in our midst beyond all of our diversity, a unifying presence which draws us so close to one another in heart.



We concluded with some announcements, then informal sharing, networking, renewing friendships and enjoying refreshments together, bringing the evening to a close. We all look forward to our next encounter together.

