

Peaceworkers Report from the Front Lines

Palestine West Bank / Bahrain / Burma / MST / Iraq

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Palestine, West Bank:

In recent news, Palestinian actions in the West Bank have moved more towards constructive programme in the last month or two. Palestinians and international activists have built a total of three protest villages thus far. Two have been destroyed but the recent village is still standing.

The first camp was constructed on Friday, January 11th. By noon, the Palestinians announced to the world that the village of Bab-al Shams (Gateway to the Sun) had been established. A day later, there were approximately 250 residents, a village council, a health clinic, a media center, a communal kitchen, and the beginnings of a library. The majority of the residents were students, activists, and popular committee leaders. However, residents of various locations in Palestine and even those from 1948 were living there as well.

1. Activists chose the site of E1 for Bab al-shams because E1's exemplification of how the Israeli government establishes "facts on the ground" (settlements) on a daily basis. In this specific area, Israel plans to build 4,000 new homes. Along with constructive power of the protest village, it was also a symbolic response to Netanyahu's settlement plan to destroy every chance of a two-state solution since the UN's recent decision to accord Palestine non-Member Observer State status.
2. Activists claimed that they would be focusing more on the constructive actions such as this, rather than marching in the streets (obstructive programme).
3. Once the new village was erected, Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the Palestinian's outpost could remain for six days while authorities discussed its removal. However, despite the ruling, the next day Israeli army officials declared the area as a closed military zone before security forces of 500 men destroyed the village and evicted the protesters. Approximately 150 protesters, in attempt to stop the village's destruction, gathered nonviolently on the ground in front of the tents. Injuries were reported and captured on camera.

(See pictures of Bab al-shams below.)





The second village was created on Monday, January 21st known as Bab al-karameh (Gate of Dignity) in Beit Iksa. The village was immediately demolished along with its mosque and olive trees by 30 army vehicles and a bulldozer; journalists were not allowed to take pictures. One of the activists, Hussam al-sheikh, claimed that the Bab al-karameh citizens will return with the citizens of Beit Iksa to continue planting olive trees and to rebuild the village. He also praised the use of constructive nonviolence as the most effective solution.

The third protest village was recently developed on Saturday, January 26th in Anin, northwest of Jenin. The new village is called Al-Asra or also known as “the prisoner’s village.” On Saturday, the governor of Jenin, Talal Dwaikot, and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Jamal Hwail, attempted to enter the village with activists but were prevented by Israeli forces. Physical clashes occurred with the governor assaulted. The firing of tear gas was also present and caused several injuries. The village still stands, information regarding its demolition or plans by the Israeli forces is not yet known.

Bahrain:

Bahrain has been extremely active each day. The amount of information feed that comes in on a daily basis regarding protest activity is overwhelming. The protesters claim that they will not back down until their demands for the establishment of a democratically elected government is met. The Bahraini government is also still denying entry to the country. Although it's not possible to provide all its activity, I've included a few recorded accounts below:

December 17th witnessed “Bahrain’s Martyr Day” in which thousands of protesters took the streets of the capital to mark the annual commemoration of two protesters martyred by the Al-Khalifa regime in 1994. Bahraini forces fired teargas, rubber bullets, and sound grenades causing severe injuries to protesters. S. Yousif Almuhafda, one of the leading activists tweeted: “I can see security forces spraying pepper spray on female protester’s faces as they mock them/laugh.”

Hundreds of accounts report regime mercenaries attacking peaceful protesters and firing toxic, lethal tear gas such as on January 21st, January 22nd, and January 24th.

On January 25th, large protests were demonstrated. However the opposition has agreed to enter into talks with the government.

1. A spokesperson for al-Wefaq, the leading opposition party, claimed, “Agreeing to dialogue doesn’t mean that we stop our protests.” Another spokesperson, Khalil al-Marzook, said that the movement was ready to partner with the ruling family and community to find solutions, but assurance in a credible process is needed first. “We need details about how the agreement will be reached, where it will go and how the people will ratify it,” he claimed. The opposition’s demands include the release of jailed Shiite political leaders and activists.

(See recent pictures of Bahrain protests below.)

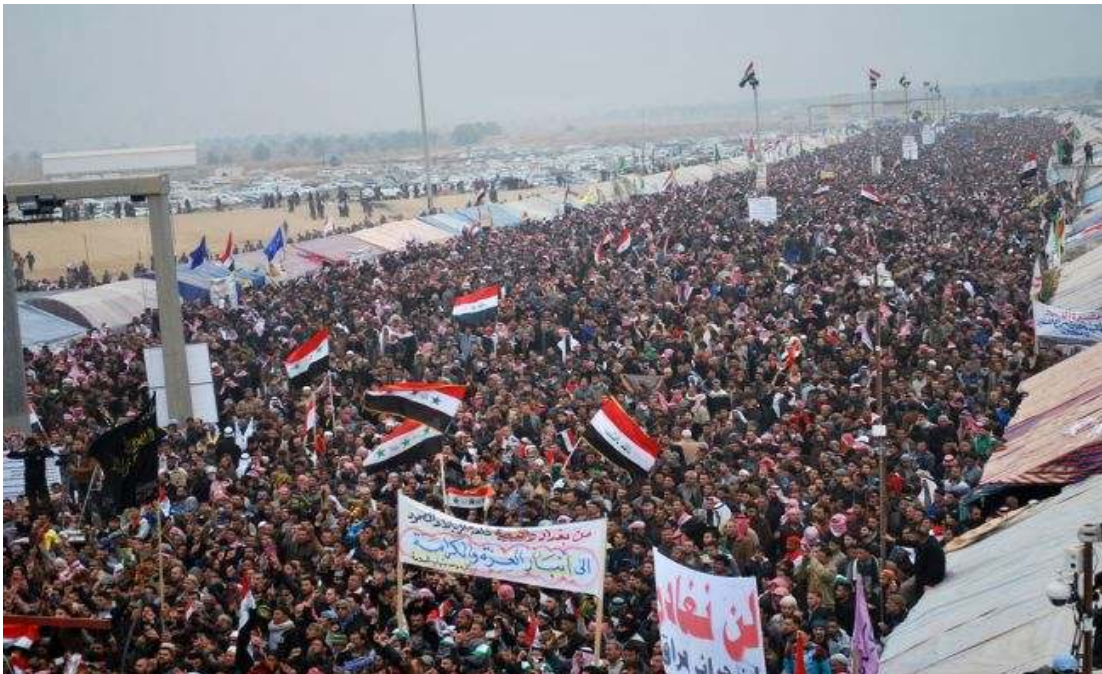


It's also worth mentioning that foreigners primarily staff the police force: Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, and almost anyone who happens to be a Sunni with an eager to earn a Bahraini passport. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, however, backs most military support. As for the protesters, support has primarily come from Iran. Each Friday, before heading to the protests, many young Shiites drive to a mosque for prayer in a northwest coast village called Dinaz. The mosque packed with the overflowing of worshippers displays large banners of Iran's Ayatollah Rubollah Khomeini.

Lastly, there are high rates of torture from the regime. Researching this movement has been the hardest for me compared to others. Pictures of torture and brutality are horrendous. Even citizens who actively post on twitter about the protests have been detained. Reported accounts of the torture of sports stars, such as Alan Hubail, have occurred as well.

Fallujah in Iraq:

There has been a recent wave of protests in Iraq. In late January, hundreds of protesters blocked the main highway leading to the Iraqi city of Fallujah after 5 protesters had been killed a day before. The protests are a series of demonstrations against the government of Nouri al-Maliki, the prime minister. Sunni demonstrators are against what they see as the increasing marginalization of Sunnis since the fall of Saddam Hussein. This may or may not be a movement to follow, but it's catching attention quite quickly. A picture is provided below of the protests that took place on January 25th.



Burma

Good news in Burma. Recently, on January 29th, the reformist government abolished a 25-year-old ban on public gatherings of more than 5 people (dated back from 1988). The end to the ban was a strong victory for protesters as they have demonstrated against this in previous months. The state run Myanma Ahlin newspaper said the law was being axed because it was not in line with the constitution.

In other news, in late December the Government announced that privately owned newspapers would be allowed to operate starting in April 2013 for the first time in almost 50 years. Journalists will no longer have to submit their work to state censors before publications.