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Religious Persecution or Political Agenda

by Naim Ateek

For a number of months there has been a consistent campaign in the West, and especially in the United States, propagating a myth that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is persecuting Christians in the West Bank and Gaza. Such news has spread quickly in the western media, and many people have been asking us to investigate such allegations. We have decided therefore, to dedicate this issue of Cornerstone to this topic which we feel is of utmost importance.

As a result of a study carried out by Jennifer Moorehead of LAW¹, it has become clear that at least three groups stand behind this campaign. Namely, the Israeli Prime Minister's office, the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, and a few western fundamentalist evangelicals who have been operating in the country with the tacit support and approval of the Israeli authority. Their manifest intention is to smear the image of the PNA and Islam by appealing to the American public, especially to the "Christian right" as well as to people in Congress. As the report of the LAW study states, these attacks have coincided with "an intensive lobbying campaign to highlight alleged persecution of Christians primarily in Islamic and 'communist' countries, [which] has given rise to two new US government initiatives: a special state department report on Christian persecution, and in the Freedom from Religious Persecution Bill under discussion in Congress which would penalize governments which discriminate against or persecute Christians² (the Wolf-Specter Bill)". The fact on the ground, however, is that the targeting of the PNA and Islam is just what is desired by some in the United States to deepen the hate against Islam, and to continue to demonize the Palestinians and their Authority. By doing so, they aim at turning western Christians, especially the religious right, against Arabs and Muslims and keeping them close and loyal to Israel. Apparently, a coalition of Christian Zionist groups have been working together to produce precisely such a result.

The study that has been conducted refers to 60 cases of Muslim converts who apparently have been converted to the Christian faith by fundamentalist evangelical missionaries, mainly western and pro-Zionist. Eight of the converts claimed to have been persecuted by the Palestinian authorities. Out of the eight, five were willing to be interviewed by LAW. Along with other members of the *Sabeel* staff, we examined these testimonies. It is difficult to conclude that their troubles with the authorities were due to their conversion.

It is important to point out that whenever a Muslim, a Jew, or a Christian converts to another religion, that person may face severe difficulties from his family and friends. In some cases it may result in total alienation by the community, or worse. Be that as it may, what is most revealing in the cases of the conversion of Muslims by pro-Zionist western Christians is the fact that they are converted to a fundamentalist or a Christian Zionist brand of Christianity and, therefore, to a Zionist political viewpoint. The Christian faith is repackaged "Zionistically." Conversion is not just to faith in a Christ who loves, liberates, and redeems but also to a Zionist world-view that they embrace totally. For these converts, to accept Jesus Christ is to accept the tenets of Religious Zionism: that the whole land of Palestine has been given by God to Jews alone and that the Palestinians have no room within that plan. This radical turn-around in the converts' belief-systems inevitably gets them into trouble with their families and

with their community. These cases are then used in turn by the Israeli and religious right protagonists to "prove" that there is religious persecution of Christians.

Fourteen Evangelical clergy, scholars, journalists, and charity leaders led by the Rev. Dr. Don Wagner came in May 1998 to investigate the allegations of persecution of Christians by the PNA. They toured the land and met with a broad number of people on all sides of the political and religious spectrum. At the end of their visit they released a press statement in which they adamantly rejected those allegations. They found the reports of abuse "to be alarmist, oversimplified, politically motivated, and inaccurate." They wrote, "Systematic persecution of Christians by the Palestinian Authority cannot be substantiated ... If Christians are being persecuted for their faith, then we wanted to document it and do all we could to stop it. What we found instead was an intense desire for harmony among both Christians and Muslims from Galilee to Gaza. There are a handful of very isolated, personal incidents, but no indication of an anti-Christian tide rising." (Please see - [EMEU Report](#) - in this issue.)

As a Christian community, we have lived with Islam for the last fourteen hundred years. Our two communities have learned to live together in good and bad times. After the Islamic conquest of Palestine, our area was ruled for several hundred years by generally tolerant Arab Muslims. With the exception of the two hundred years of extremely intolerant western Crusaders' rule, most of the other rulers were largely non-Arab Muslims, many of whom were as brutal to Arab Christians as to Arab Muslims. Unfortunately, therefore, our area of the Middle East has suffered for hundreds of years as a result of one form of occupation or another. Although both religions have many things in common, the tragedy is that many people have emphasized the differences that separate us. Today under Israeli occupation, as under previous occupations, the state uses social problems that arise within the Palestinian society. It gives these problems religious interpretations and connotations in order to drive a wedge between the two religious communities and enforce its control. Much of the time, incidents that are bound to occur within the normal daily life of a community tend to be exaggerated and abused by those who seek political advantage. Furthermore, we are fully aware that in the Middle East, as in some other areas in the world, religious sensitivities and sentiments are the easiest to be aroused and are used to inflame other issues.

We do not deny that some inter communal problems exist and many community leaders, both Muslim and Christian, are usually quick to redress them. Yasser Arafat himself has on more than one occasion, asked certain people from both communities to intervene in local conflict resolution. Arafat has remained close to the heads of the Christian churches and continues to try to maintain an open relationship with them. Moreover, a number of his closest aides are Christians and recently he appointed a Christian prelate to be a close personal advisor.

This does not mean, however, that we can easily gloss over some present areas of concern, such as the problems arising from mixed marriages between Christians and Muslims. At a recent meeting in Ramallah, I was privileged to take part in a panel with two prominent Muslim sheikhs and an Eastern Orthodox archimandrite. The presentations were given with candor and issues of concern were shared and discussed. Admittedly, much more needs to be done in order to address the various needs. But none of these problems come close to being considered persecution. We, Christians and Muslims, are one community ethnically belonging to the same Palestinian people. We share the same political hopes and aspirations and certainly, the same political destiny. We are committed to peace and reconciliation based on a just resolution to the conflict with Israel. We all believe that Israel should withdraw totally from all the areas it occupied in 1967 including East Jerusalem. We work together for the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state. Although we are one people, we belong to two religions, Christianity and Islam. We have lived together in close proximity for the last fourteen centuries, and many myths and stereotypes have been created around each other. We need to continue to address these issues in a spirit of respect and openness. With our strong faith in the One God, and in our determination to achieve liberation, we will continue to work toward better religious understanding and acceptance of each other. Our vision: a Palestinian community that is based on the principles of equal democracy for all regardless of a person's religious affiliation.

1. *LAW - the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment.*
2. *The Freedom from Religious Persecution Bill actually legislates not only for Christians but for religious minorities.*

The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek is director of Sabeel Liberation Theology Center.

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News in Brief

Jerusalem - a Little Step Forward

Arab East Jerusalem was accepted as a full member of the International Federation of United Cities at its conference in Lille, France. The June 7 decision brings East Jerusalem into a body which attracted 500 cities to the conference.

Source - [Palestine Report](#)

Threat to Beit Jala Residents

700 Palestinians, threatened with homelessness due to demolition orders, have appealed to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) for help. Israel has slapped the residents of 'Ain 'Awna neighborhood in Beit Jala with the orders on the grounds that the homes are illegal. But residents claim that the Jerusalem municipality aims to annex that neighborhood, and clear it of all West Bank ID holders.

Source - [Palestine Report](#)

A Massacre is a Massacre

We would like to correct one figure from our item on the Deir Yassin massacre ([News in Brief - Cornerstone, Easter 1998](#)). We gave the number of Palestinians reported killed on that awful day of April 9, 1948 as being "about 245" villagers. Since that issue went to print there has been the 50 year commemoration of that day, and in the wake of that, further probing.

An inflated figure was given out by a Jewish military commander with an eye to the propaganda war. Mordechai Ra'anani owned up to this distortion. He sought to further terrorize the Palestinian population. News of the massacre, on this exaggerated scale, then swept the Land - causing people to flee in panic.

More reasonable estimates were submerged for decades - until a proper study was done. A 1987 report by Birzeit University's Research and Documentation Center based its findings on interviews of the survivors. The names of family members and friends lost were listed, and these totaled 107. The researchers concluded that "the number of those killed does not exceed 120".

Source - *Deir Yassin*, by Kanani and Zitawi, 1987, Birzeit University - Research and Documentation Center, etc.

O God, Help Us!

Israel's acquisition of three submarines from Germany capable of carrying nuclear-armed cruise missiles looms - a date of "early 1999" was announced for their handover to the navy. Israel states the purpose as being to deter any enemy from trying to take out her nuclear weapons with a surprise attack.

Israel reportedly has 150 nuclear warheads and 50 intermediate range missiles to carry them at Zachariah air force base southeast of Tel Aviv. With nuclear devices stored at other locations, the total Israeli arsenal may consist of as many as 400 nuclear weapons.

Many people see the application of a double standard in the way the US reacts to India and Pakistan on the one hand, and to Israel on the other. Israel has always refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The new submarines give a further twist to the arms race spiral, and heighten instability in the region.

Sources - *Jerusalem Post*, etc.

The Spirit Can't Be Killed!

Hebron area:

You remember the al-Atrash family, written up in our Easter issue? They were completing the second rebuilding of their house (with the support of Christian Peacemaker Teams and other peace groups).

June 11, Israel's armed forces came calling again - demolition number 3! And now this tenacious family prepares to build for the fourth time.

In sight of the al-Atrash home, their neighbors - the abu-Turki family - are mourning the loss of Abdul Majid, the head of their family.

On June 16, Abdul Majid was walking home from work when he was killed after being struck by a club held out of passing van. Two 16 year-old youths from Beit Haggai - a school for troubled youth built on land confiscated from the abu-Turki family and other neighbors - were remanded after confessing to their role in Abdul Majid's death.

Readers may feel moved to act. If you are so led, please consider joining [Campaign for Secure Dwellings](#) (see [Cornerstone, Easter issue](#)), or do whatever you can to express your outrage against Israel's unjust policy on house demolitions.

Sources - various.

Muslim-Christian Cooperation

A ground-breaking agreement has been reached between the Vatican and the al-Azhar Higher Islamic Association, in Egypt. A joint committee has been formed to fight religious fundamentalism and terrorism. The result - Christians and Muslims will be working together for peace, justice and mutual religious respect. The pact was signed on May 27 by Sheikh Fawzi al-Zafzaf and Cardinal Francis Arinzi.

Source - [*Palestine Report*](#)

Infant Health Gains

The Palestinian Health Ministry reports (June 15) that the infant mortality rate for PNA areas is now 22 deaths per 1,000 births. At one time, the rate was 50 per 1,000.

Source - [*Palestine Report*](#)

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LAW Report - The Myth of Christian Persecution by the PA

In the past year, much publicity has been given to reports of persecution of both established Christians and Christian converts from Islam by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). LAW - the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment - received many inquiries concerning this issue. As a result, LAW decided to investigate, and produced a report: *The Myth of Christian Persecution by the Palestinian Authority*. The following is a summary of the report. (Direct quotes from the report are in italics.)

"Persecution of Christians in the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority [PA] has become an ever-growing issue in the international arena. Foreign consulates, the US government and various European interests have focused attention on allegations of a policy of systematic persecution by the Palestinian Authority of its Christian minority population. LAW has also received many inquiries concerning this issue. This was surprising, as in the course of LAW's work it had never come across

complaints of the mistreatment of Christians in the areas under the Palestinian Authority. ..."

"In the course of its research ... LAW found no evidence of persecution of Christians as a part of a policy on the part of the Palestinian Authority, although some degree of tension between the Christian and Moslem communities does exist. Claims of persecution, couched as they are in the terminology of human rights, have gained a currency in Israel and abroad that far outweighs the evidence that supports them. Suggestions of persecution, however, have a strongly negative international impact, and are used by special interest groups in the United States to forward a particular agenda seen as hostile to local Palestinians. ..."

"The recent reports of persecution of Palestine's Christian population gained currency after the 'leaking' of an Israeli Prime Minister's office report about the persecution of Christians in areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority."

"The Prime Minister's report, and later articles concerning the report, also [blame] ongoing emigration of the Christian population of the West Bank and Jerusalem and the dramatic decline in their population on their poor relations with their Moslem neighbors, now represented by the Palestinian Authority. The Prime Minister's report claims that during the British Mandate period, Bethlehem had a Christian majority of 80% while today, under Palestinian rule, it has a Moslem majority of 80%. The report links this massive emigration to the untenable living conditions under the Palestinian Authority.

"This superficial example fails to examine the catastrophic [effects] of thirty years of Israeli occupation over the Palestinian Territories. ... Bernard Sabella, Professor of Sociology at Bethlehem University and demographic expert, gives a very different interpretation of the causes of this emigration. The massive outmigration resulted from the exodus of 726,000 Palestinian refugees during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Fifty to sixty thousand Palestinian Christians, comprising 35% of all Christians in pre-1948 Mandatory Palestine, were among the refugees. ... The catastrophic condition of the Palestinian economy, particularly after redeployment and as a result of stifled trade and ongoing embargoes, has encouraged ongoing emigration among the generally better-educated Christian minority."

The damage that can be done by paying heed to false and exaggerated reports is highlighted by local Christian leaders:

"Local evangelical Christian pastors sent a letter to Jerry Falwell urging him to recognize the injustices done to the Palestinian people as a whole (Moslems as well as Christians) and that 'by lobbying against any further Israeli troop withdrawals from

the West Bank, you are endorsing the theft of Palestinian lands and adopting the dangerous position of Israeli extremists.' ... The heads of the Christian communities in Palestine, several mayors and the heads of prominent institutions in the Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour area denounced the Israeli propaganda and declared that the allegations were false and intended 'only to encourage ethnic strife'. ... The Latin-rite Catholic Patriarchate reacted similarly. ..."

Turning from the question of persecution of Christians in general - shown to be without real foundation - to the issue of how Christian converts from Islam fare: Eight instances of converts claiming persecution were cited by LAW (out of a total of about 60 converts). Of the eight, five gave their testimony, which appears in the report. All five were imprisoned by the PNA, and four of them were either tortured or maltreated while there. However, the LAW report shows at some length that even here, the claim of persecution by reason of their faith is not clearcut. Some of these converts had a record of troublemaking in their communities; typically, there was also a shift of political views among the new believers - here is one reported example:

"Some accuse the Jewish of stealing land, and it is difficult for the Palestinians to accept the existence of settlements. But I know from the Bible and the word of God that this land is promised for the Jewish and not the Arabs. He didn't leave Ismail here, but he (God) placed him in Arabia. Arabia is the richest country in the world, because Ismail is blessed. This land here is promised for the Jews. Before I believed in Palestine, and in pushing Israel into the sea. But after believing in Jesus, I changed my beliefs and must believe in the word of God and not my own ideas."

LAW provides another view of the arrest of Christians by looking at the PNA record on human rights generally. In the context of the question, Were they arrested for their faith? the report says:

"Indeed, the PA has recently engaged in mass arrests of Moslem activists, in which hundreds have been detained for long periods without charge by various security services. The same logic could be applied here, that the PA has a policy of oppressing Moslems for their faith. ... conversion to Christianity, already frowned upon by Shari'a law, and prolonged and close relations with illegal settlers, play a role in how these converts were treated and the line of questioning put to them while under interrogation. More importantly, their conversions, the subsequent change in belief-structure, and resulting relations with Israeli settlers affected negatively their relations within their communities."

Given that the evidence is against any systematic policy of persecution of Christians by the PNA, who are the parties in Israel-Palestine active in spreading accounts of discrimination? Apart from the prime minister's office, there is the International

Christian Embassy of Jerusalem, a Christian Zionist organization which lends strong support to the state of Israel. A number of evangelical Christians (notably David Ortiz - pastor of some of the converts who are in the LAW report) also join in.

The local stories of PNA persecution of Christians were taken to the US, and hyped at a critical time:

"The allegations of Christian persecution in PA areas tapped into a sympathetic vein as support for the Religious Persecution bill grew [see editorial]. While the issues at stake are more general than the allegations of Christian persecution in the PA areas, some of the bill's strongest supporters also are the greatest friends of Israel. ..."

"Many proponents of the Wolf-Specter bill have, of course, genuinely good intentions. The debate, its origins, and the kind and quality of information used to support the bill remains suspect, however. Arab Christians, representatives of the most ancient Christian communities, were excluded from general discussion, and not one Arab Christian leader participated in the Congressional hearings. ..."

The LAW report notes that, in contrast to the well-fanned stories of systematic persecution by the PNA, very little attention is given to the issue of religious freedom within Israel's own territory. The writer goes on to address this point:

"In a state that defines itself as Jewish, most government sponsored or subsidized projects, and most administrative and bureaucratic procedures, discriminate on the basis of religion."

The report then lists six areas of structured religious discrimination in Israel:

1. Together, the Jewish National Fund and the government own 93% of Israel's land. The Jewish National Fund has a statute prohibiting sale or lease of land to non-Jews.
2. Government funding for institutions in the Jewish sector is greater than for those in the non-Jewish sector.
3. Holy sites - only Jewish holy places receive government money for their preservation.
4. The Minister of Religious Affairs is authorized to establish religious councils in Jewish towns and cities, for the oversight of religious institutions, cemeteries and graves. There is no such provision for Christians or Muslims.
5. The Law of Return guarantees immediate, automatic citizenship to all Jewish immigrants, but excludes native Christians and Muslims who were displaced during the 1948 or 1967 wars.

6. Israeli ID cards (which must be carried), specify whether the holder is Jewish or non-Jewish.

LAW concludes this section by pointing out the hostility in Israel toward the proselytizing activity of some Christians among local Jews. The double standard - parties appearing to be very keen on religious freedom in PNA areas, as long as this freedom is kept on the far side of the Green Line - is well-illustrated.

From the Conclusion to the report:

"It became clear through the research, and through the overwhelming response of the local Christian communities, that allegations of a general policy of persecution by the Palestinian Authority against the ancient Christian community were based on misconstrued and often false information. Local Christian responses were also entirely disregarded. The origins of these allegations are racist and are forwarded with a specific political intent. Hostility to Islam and to the Palestinian Authority fueled the allegations put forward by the Prime Ministers office, in a report seen as 'bread and butter' for the Israeli administration's propaganda war against the Palestinian Authority.

"But the issue of Moslem converts within their communities remained a more problematic issue, and LAW approached this topic with extreme sensitivity. These people had been jeopardized within their communities, and there remained a possibility of mistreatment of these people for their faith. What it found, however, was a group of marginalized, troubled people, with various pre-existing problems within their communities, with no evidence that their problems with local security services were based solely upon their faith, or that they suffered from an overall policy of persecution for their faith.":

To sum up, the LAW report clearly shows the fallacy behind PNA Christian persecution charges, putting in perspective those instances of abuse cited by a small number of converts from Islam. By debunking these hyped-up allegations, LAW serves the cause of peace, and heightens respect for the concrete achievements of the PNA.

The full text of *The Myth of Christian Persecution by the Palestinian Authority* can be seen on LAW's website at: <http://www.lawsociety.org/>

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Evangelicals Counter Claims of Christian Persecution

[Editorial note. The following [report](#) by [Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding](#) (EMEU), is printed in its entirety, so that readers can judge for themselves the findings of this independent, US-based group. The report was filed under the above heading, at the end of EMEU's local investigation.]

Jerusalem - May 22, 1998.

"Systematic persecution of Christians by the Palestinian Authority cannot be substantiated," concluded a group of 14 Evangelical scholars, journalists, and charity leaders who just completed a two-week fact-finding trip to the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel. They came to look into allegations of persecution of Christians by the Palestinian Authority that have been widely publicized recently. To the contrary, the group found the earlier reports of abuse to be alarmist, oversimplified, politically motivated, and inaccurate.

The group was organized by Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding and led by EMEU's Executive Director, Dr. Donald Wagner. He says, "If Christians are being persecuted for their faith, then we wanted to document it and do all we could to stop it. What we found instead was an intense desire for harmony among both Christians and Muslims from Galilee to Gaza. There are a handful of very isolated, personal incidents, but no indication of an anti-Christian tide rising."

The EMEU team met with government leaders in Israel and Palestine as well as Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant clergy and church members, human rights groups, local university officials, and international charities.

EMEU cautions that there is an important difference between isolated incidents and coordinated, intentional persecution, especially by governments. It is a dreadful misuse of the term to call what is happening here "persecution of Christians."

The group did hear accounts of tensions common in any culture with majority and minority populations. Those stories were few and of little consequence compared to the many practical examples of Muslim-Christian cooperation they witnessed. "It is apparent that Palestinian Christians within the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority enjoy more freedom of expression, political freedom and economic autonomy than in most other Middle Eastern societies," Wagner says. "It the same time, we hope the world will keep a watchful eye on what happens here. If strict Islamic Law ever takes hold, it could severely restrict freedom of religion. That would be a tragedy."

The Evangelical study team believes the best way to assure religious freedom would be for a viable Palestinian state to be established soon with a secular democratic government including both Christians and Muslims in positions of authority. EMEU also calls for an increase in programs for economic development, democracy building, and education which foster positive relations between Muslims and Christians. Frustration with the stagnant peace process, deep poverty, and hostile Israeli occupation policies foment what would be otherwise avoidable conflicts in Palestinian society, EMEU says.

"We found disturbing indications of political motivations behind recent publicity about Christian persecution. We deplore efforts by anyone to pit people of one faith against those of another religion in order to strengthen a political position," says Dr. Wagner. EMEU concluded that the primary issues are political, and casting them in religious language is counterproductive to reach a just and lasting peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

EMEU found close ties between the staunchly pro-Israel International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem and appointees within the Netanyahu government. When reports surfaced of five Muslim converts to Christianity being mistreated by the Palestinian Authority, both the Netanyahu government and the I.C.E.J. delivered those allegations to the international press. This was done without thoroughly investigating the circumstances nor consulting with Arab church leaders. By contrast, a leading human rights group, LAW - The Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment, did investigate and just issued a 49 page detailed report.

"What it [the LAW investigation] found was a group of marginalized, troubled people, with various preexisting problems within their various communities, with no evidence that their problems with local security services were based solely upon their faith, or that they suffered from an overall policy of persecution for their faith. Their conversion, and their relations with area settlers, seemed to aggravate already troubled relations within their societies."

(from page 39 of the report).

LAW keeps the Palestinian Authority under tight scrutiny and is often critical of the PA. In this investigation, they determined the PA was not guilty of the accusations against it.

In the case of one man, there is clear evidence of mistreatment by local police quite possibly in response to his conversion from Islam to Christianity. In that instance, the human rights group determined his abuse was more an indictment of the PA's inability to control certain officers than a sanction of their conduct. No overt campaign to abuse Christian converts could be found.

LAW concluded, *"Claims of persecutions, couched as they are in the terminology of human rights, have gained a currency in Israel and abroad that far outweighs the evidence that supports them. Suggestions of persecution, however, have a strongly negative international impact, and are used by special interest groups in the United States to forward a particular agenda seen as hostile to local Palestinians."*

EMEU questions whether exaggerated accounts of Christian persecution are a ploy to influence either the resumption of peace negotiations or to sway American lawmakers considering the Wolf-Specter Bill on religious persecution. "Manipulation has to be opposed especially if it is meant to discourage public sympathy for suffering Palestinians or to distort facts before Congress as it considers an important law," Wagner says.

The oldest Christian communities in the world are in the Middle East. All Christians can trace their heritage here, yet there is little awareness among Christians in the West that these people need our help. 60% of the Christian population in Palestine has emigrated in the last 20 years. The EMEU team heard repeatedly that the causes for this flight are poverty and loss of personal freedoms due to Israeli occupation. While the number of Christians has remained constant, there is a frightening decline in the percentage of Christians in relation to the total population in the Holy Land. Christianity is in decline not because of religious persecution; rather as a consequence of political instability and the resulting economic hardships and lack of ordinary freedoms like a Bethlehem family finding it impossible to visit relatives only five miles away in Jerusalem. As extreme as it may sound, there is a possibility that the Christian community could virtually disappear from the Holy Land, leaving only historic monuments behind. This is a time when all Christians need to rally to the support [of] fellow Christians in the Holy Land, most of whom are Arabs.

EMEU did not intend to examine Christian-Jewish tension on this research trip, but discovered those tensions to be every bit as strong or stronger than Christian problems in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As a case in point, on May 20, a bill passed its first of three readings in the Knesset that would in effect ban evangelistic activities by Christians (or any religion other than Judaism) in Israel. The new bill strengthens a 1977 Israeli Knesset decision on the same matter but the proposed legislation increases the penalties for a broader range of mission activities, including "verbal, written, recorded or broadcast" forms of mission and evangelism. Further, the proposed legislation criminalizes the activities making them punishable with "three years of imprisonment or a fine of NIS (Israeli Shekels) 50,000." (Article 174 C of Proposed Law by MK Rafael Pinchasi). EMEU objects to such laws as an affront to religious freedom. Wagner added: "Perhaps the focus of those interested in religious freedom should shift their attention to fight the proposed legislation in Israel that has far-reaching consequences for the church and Christians in the Holy Land."

Likewise, EMEU is wary of any move the Palestinian Authority might institute Sharia Law (Islamic canon laws) that would limit activities of any faith including the open discussion of theological issues.

EMEU found the situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories would be enormously improved by a swift and just peace settlement. If present conditions persist, both Israelis and the Palestinians will suffer while the flow of Christians out of the Holy Land is likely to continue. As Dr. Don Wagner, Executive Director of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, puts it, "For centuries Jerusalem has been known as the center for the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Christian community is in danger of diminishing to utter insignificance in the place of its birth. In coming years, will the only worshipers here be foreign visitors? That could happen if hopelessness drags on and there is not a just and durable peace for Israel and the Palestinians."

The EMEU team included senior executives of international ministries, a private school administrator, university professors, a psychologist, journalists, and pastors.

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Muslim-Christian Relations in Palestine

by Atallah Hanna

Various reports have been publicized recently, charging that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is persecuting Christians. In this article we would like to affirm in all honesty that these reports are untrue, and express our indignation at these fabricated claims.

Christian Palestinians have not, and I believe will not, suffer at the hands of the PNA, but this is only part of the story. Christians here are indeed suffering, but this is as a result of the harsh conditions undergone due to the faltering peace process, and the ongoing denial of legitimate rights to Palestinians. In this, Muslims and Christians suffer equally.

The publicity given to these false rumors at this particular time causes mistrust and confusion. But worse, it could adversely affect the good relations that have historically bound Muslims and Christians together into a single Palestinian family.

We cannot allow these allegations to go unchallenged at a time when the PNA desperately needs help and support. To slander the PNA is to do damage to the Palestinian people in general, for we are a united people - having a shared culture and history. Arab Christians and Muslims are bound together by a common set of social, behavioral and moral norms. We do not need interpreters to relate to each other; our one language helps to shape our close mutual relationships, whether social or civic.

Today both religions are in favor of dialogue and encounter. Quality dialogue does not distance believers from their faith, but rather dignifies us as human beings created in the image of God. It is said that we are enemies of what we are ignorant of, and so dialogue has traditionally been used as a gateway to enlightenment and the elimination of causes of possible conflict.

In our journey through history, we sons and daughters of Palestine have been bound by love and a mutual destiny. For instance, Christian Palestinians are proud of their national allegiance, and have always worked alongside their Muslim brothers for the national cause. To list all the areas of agreement between Muslims and Christians would be to belabor the point. Rather than recording the bonds that exist, we do better to demonstrate them, and continue to uphold the dignity of all members of this one people.

It is natural within a family for some disagreements and misunderstandings to arise, but this does not mean that any kind of crisis exists in Muslim-Christian relations, as some would have us believe. These family disagreements are settled routinely, as in the family context.

Education is of the utmost importance in reinforcing our national unity, and combating any attempt to break this down. It is the role of education to foster tolerance and love within the Palestinian family, and it is our duty to raise awareness and pride in our common heritage and sound Arab values. This same message needs to be further emphasized from the pulpits of our churches and mosques. Religious leaders from both communities need to meet on a regular basis, to ensure that they are doing all they can to promote mutual harmony.

I would like to suggest the establishment of a Muslim-Christian council that would include clergy from both communities. This council could study and decide on matters of common concern. We would encourage the PNA to give its support to such a key project, granting it official status and making use of its recommendations.

The Palestinian people, of whom we Christians are an integral part, should look toward a better future - by learning from past mistakes we can avoid being a target of

those who do not wish us well. Our history has proved that these attempts to create conflict between us are bound to fail in the end.

We call on all peace-loving peoples to support the firm resolve and steadfastness of the Palestinian people, as we work toward the realization of a peace that is based on the principles of justice, equality and human rights. At this crucial time of nation-building: laying the foundations and infrastructure of a healthy local economy, the need to defend the Palestinian Authority against this charge is clear. There is no policy of persecution - let us therefore stand together, for in unity there is strength.

Archimandrite Dr. Atallah Hanna - Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.

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Church in Wales Group Visit

by Valerie Martin

In May, *Sabeel* was host to a group from the Church in Wales. This group was very pleased with the results of their 10 day stay - as Valerie Martin, their leader, reported. They were especially impressed with the commitment shown by the *Sabeel* people they met. But then, this finding went along with their view of the many other local people they were introduced to - as Valerie herself writes of them: "There is no doubt that these people were indeed really holy."

Other high points in the visit were being able to engage in Bible studies in which the emphasis was on connecting the reading of the Scriptures with the day-to-day reality on the ground. This and the way that the organizers' local knowledge of the Land was shared, together helped to round out a worthwhile trip.

On the strength of this visit, there is a firm desire on the part of both the Church in Wales' group leadership, and *Sabeel*, for their mutual relationship to grow, benefiting people in Wales as well as Christians and others here in the Land.

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Christian-Muslim Relations in Palestine - A Personal View

by Zoughbi Zoughbi

Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of the day. (Thomas Jefferson, 1816)

Palestinian Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people. Despite their religious identity as Christian, their national identity is as part of the Arab Palestinian culture and civilization. While the small numbers of Palestinian Christians do not make them quantitatively significant, their presence is strongly felt qualitatively. Throughout history, Palestinian Christians have chosen to be fellow citizens in the common struggle against any kind of foreign or colonial rule, regardless of its religious or ethnic identity. Consider the following historical points. Palestinian Christians, like Palestinian Muslims, were victims of the 1948 war. Sixty percent of the Christians were kicked out of what became Israel in 1948. Many of the 400 plus villages that were leveled in 1948 had a mix of Christian and Muslim inhabitants. Many churches and mosques in these villages were also destroyed. Twenty-three thousand Palestinian Christians were expelled by force in an ethnic cleansing campaign along with twenty-two thousand Palestinian Muslims, from Jerusalem. In the wake of the 1948 war the number of Christians has dwindled drastically, and it continues to drop steadily, as a result of the political and economic instability.

Fifty years later, the Israeli government is still trying to distort the image of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian struggle. Propaganda and lies have been spread regarding Christian-Muslim relations between the PNA and the Palestinian Christians. Such a strategy - from the right-wing Israeli government, with the cooperation of the Christian Embassy in Jerusalem and in coalition with right-wing Christian groups in the US - aims at dividing and conquering the Palestinians as well as dehumanizing them.

Palestinian Christians are often asked about the nature of the relationship between Christians and Muslims, and between the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Christians. Addressing the latter, the PNA is building a non-constitutionally-Muslim¹ country where Christians and Muslims should enjoy equal rights. The PNA functions as a governing body and not as individuals who have different religious backgrounds. Yasser Arafat, as the elected head of this governing body, registered 88% of the vote in the 1996 election. Arafat regards all Palestinian citizens as equals. Moreover, he has gone the extra mile by applying affirmative action in a positive manner. A quota system ensures that seven of the eighty-eight seats in the Legislative Council are for Palestinian Christians. This is eight percent of the seats, while Christians make up only two percent of the population in the West Bank and Gaza.

(Similarly, the Samaritans, who number in total three hundred and twenty persons, have a seat in the council.)

In addition, a good number of Arafat's top aides are Christians. And for the first time in the Palestinian areas, Christmas, New Year, and Easter have been recognized as official holidays. These are a few indications of the good Christian-Muslim relations within the PNA. Another example is the church currently under construction at the site of Jacob's Well in Nablus. Under Israeli rule, the church was not allowed to be built. The PNA however, not only encouraged, but has facilitated the process of building this church at this important religious site. This is just one of many examples of the good relationship between the PNA and the church institutions.

The same thing is found at the personal level of a Palestinian society which has served as the model of inter-religious harmony in the Arab world. An outsider visiting the Holy Land would indeed find it hard to distinguish between the Palestinian Christian and Muslim. People from both religions visit with each other, work together, and resolve conflicts with each other. For example recently, Muslim friends were present at my nephew's baptism. Again, even Christian schools have a majority of Muslim students. Also, this past year, the 900 Muslim students and the administration at Jerusalem University threw a Christmas party for the eighteen Christian students. These are only a few of the countless examples that I could share.

The closure of Jerusalem and the fragmenting of the Palestinian areas into "Palestans" (bantustans), create a lot of economic and political difficulties: the economic situation is deteriorating, the political situation is unstable and inflation is high. Erasmus said "Horses are born, human beings are made". So in a sense we are the products of the socio-economic and political conditions. Living in a pressure cooker situation, no one can expect Palestinian individuals to act as angels. Inevitably, conflicts arise. Individuals can have conflict with each other regardless of politics, religion or class, and this is something natural in any society. I do not understand why there are voices spreading rumors about negative relationships between Christian and Muslim Palestinians at a time when clearly, the present right-wing government in Israel is the biggest negative of all.

I am constantly reminded by grassroots organizations that it is not my Muslim brother who prevents me from going to church in Jerusalem on a Sunday. It is the Israeli soldier. It is not my Muslim brother who requires an old woman to get a permit from Israeli officials to be admitted to a Jerusalem hospital. Again, it is Israel that makes my American wife leave every few months to get a tourist visa, and denies her citizenship, while any person who claims their great-great-grandmother was Jewish can come and live in any part of the Holy Land - regardless of whether or not that person is religiously observant, and regardless of who their spouse is. It is Israel that

makes us suffer in the hot summer months without sufficient water to cook and clean, while Israeli settlers and citizens have running water twenty-four hours a day, their pools overflowing and their gardens blooming. These are just tiny tastes of the day-to-day living situation in Palestine. These are the difficulties that challenge us all, Muslim and Christian, in our struggle for self-determination and statehood.

In short, the conflict is not between Muslims and Christians, it is between Palestinians as a whole and the anti-peace government in Israel. For those who are concerned about the Christian presence in Palestine, I hope that their efforts will be joined with our efforts to fight for social justice, political stability and the realization of the rights of all peoples and citizens. Martin Luther King once asked: Where are we headed - community building or chaos? We want to head toward community building. But this will not happen except with the consolidation of the three dimensions of the struggle - the Palestinian struggle to end occupation, the Israeli peace camp's parallel struggle to end Israel's role as occupiers, and the struggle of the pro-justice camp and NGO bodies to provide an effective and honest third party arbitrator. Only with this consolidation can we gain the leverage to offset the imbalance of power and cause the Israeli government to yield to the international way of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - through negotiation and peace talks. We look for that day when our hopes will be realized. When Jerusalem will be not only a model of coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis once again - a place where we accept each other as we are - but also an oasis where earthly and heavenly Jerusalem can be enjoyed!

1. *A state in which over 90% of the people are Muslim, but the constitution is not based on Shari'a (the religious law of Islam).*

Zoughbi Zoughbi is the director of Wi'am Conflict Resolution Center, Bethlehem; he is also on the board of Sabeel.

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Living in an Islamic Environment

by Pierre Shantz

Before coming to Hebron I knew very little about Islam. I'd taken a World Religions course in high school and one of my friends studied Islam in college and explained a few things to me, but I still didn't understand Islam. I knew even less what it would be like to live in a Muslim culture. I still can't claim to be an expert on Islam. Far from it. And, living in Hebron is much different than living in Bethlehem or Ramallah where

Muslims and Christians live together. But from my seven months of experience here I can offer some brief reflections on my experience as a Christian living in the most conservative Muslim city in the West Bank. I must clarify that I am a Canadian and not Palestinian. From both my Muslim and Christian Palestinian friends I have heard stories of discrimination from one religion to another but I have also heard stories of good relations.

My college friend had explained to me that to be a Muslim you must follow the religious laws very strictly. I found this very interesting. "Finally," I thought, "a religion that is unified, where everyone is on the same page."

Terrorists, holy wars, martyrdom, these are some of the stereotypes of Muslims in the western world. Our movies often show Arab Muslims as the bad guys - they run around with big eyes and unkempt beards and plot bombings. During the Cold War the western world had the Russians and communism to fight, but today the emphasis is on Arabs and Muslims. Saddam Hussein has become a symbol of the Muslim world. When the Oklahoma City bombing happened, immediately it was thought that Arab Islamists had committed the act. Some Arab people were not able to leave the city. The true culprit turned out to be a US-military-trained Caucasian Christian. Our culture has become prejudiced against Islam and sadly, many right-wing Christian leaders (Jerry Falwell and others), have tended to demonize Muslims.

In Christianity we have a wide range of denominations and varying levels of conservatism. We as Christians disagree on many fundamental issues, one is pacifist, another believes in the death penalty, others don't believe in hell. Because of the wide range of beliefs, Christians sometimes seem less than consistent. Jesus talked about love for thy neighbor and we seem to do a lot of fighting amongst ourselves.

Contrary to what I thought and was told, Islam is much like Christianity in that there are different streams and understandings. There are pacifists such as Ferial Abu Haikal, a headmistress at a local school who teaches her children to resist in nonviolent ways. There are extremists, and images of what they do are portrayed all over the news. There are some conservatives who follow the law very strictly; some women will cover their heads (we also have this in Christianity); some men do not shake hands with women. There are also some more liberal people who will have a little wine if they go to Bethlehem, and once in a while I even find someone who tries to convert me.

One characteristic that does not seem to differ from one Muslim to another is their acceptance and respect for me as a Christian. Everywhere I go I will find a cup of tea or coffee to drink. People will cook their meals with enough extra to feed someone who drops in for a visit. One day another member of the team, our translator and

myself were visiting a family. After several hours we were ready to leave. The father pulled back a curtain and presented to us a spread of fried potatoes, eggs, hummus, bread and other delicious food. This was the first time we met the family. There was no reason for them to prepare a meal, it was not during regular mealtime hours. This was simply a gesture of hospitality that is common here. When visiting someone it is impolite not to serve something and it is just as impolite to refuse. This family extended the welcome with that little extra touch. On other occasions too we have received a full meal; and with tea and coffee, some fruit or cookies are almost always offered. The culture here is very unselfish. It makes us, back home, look like the Scrooge. Even after being here for seven months I still find myself hiding what I am eating if someone drops by and being upset that my lunch is being interrupted. We westerners are much more inclined to be individualistic.

Pierre is seen here with Mahmoud, a friend and a member of the Hebron police force.

Christians and Muslims pray to the same God; the God that told Abraham to go on his journey of faith; the God that sent Jesus with a message that would change the world (although Muslims don't believe that Jesus was God, they believe he was a great prophet).

The history of Christianity in Palestine has not always been a good one: the Crusades of the past, and in the present the various flavors of "Christian Zionism" that often seem to support Israel's continual injustice towards the Palestinians. CPT is here to show a different face of Christianity to the Palestinian Muslims of Hebron. We are trying to live the love and mercy that Jesus showed to all those who were in need, whether they were Jew or Gentile. I think it is because of this approach that we have been so well received by the Muslim community.

Pierre Shantz is a member of [Christian Peacemaker Teams](#) (CPT).

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Remembering Al-Nakbah

by Naim Ateek

Inside Westminster Cathedral, London, May 2 Palestinian Remembrance Service.

The following article is the text of a sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Naim S. Ateek in Westminster Cathedral, London, May 2, 1998. This was the occasion of the Palestinian Remembrance Service:

In the Name of the One God, Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer, Amen

A Look At The Past

Fifty years ago, the 6000 Palestinian inhabitants of the town of Beisan, in the Jordan Valley, were displaced by Zionist Jews. Some of the Palestinians fled in terror having heard what the Zionists had done a few weeks before in the village of Deir Yasin, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, when dozens of innocent men, women, and children were massacred. In spite of this, a good number of Beisan's inhabitants remained. A few days later, however, the remaining population of the town were forced out at gun point. Within two hours, Beisan was totally evacuated from all of its Palestinian inhabitants. Everything they owned, their homes, their businesses, their gardens, their orchards, their land and property, their schools, their churches and mosques became the property of the occupiers. The name of the town was changed from Beisan to Beth Shean, and Jewish immigrants were placed in Palestinian homes. Everything seemed to have been carried out nonchalantly and in order.

Beisan is my hometown. I was born there and still cherish early childhood memories with my parents, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors. Beisan has come to encapsulate for me the tragedy of Palestine when three quarter of a million Palestinians either fled in fright or were driven out by force to make room for the creation of the state of Israel. Seventy seven percent of the area of Palestine was wrested from the Palestinians to establish the Jewish state. Consequently, the erection of refugee camps, the dispersion of the Palestinians throughout the whole world, the confiscation of their land, the segmentation of their community inside the Jewish state, their life as second class citizens under a military government, the humiliation and the dehumanization of the whole Palestinian people.

From the perspective of the powerful Zionists, the taking over of Palestine represented the success of their project. Drunk with their impressive victories, they imagined that no one would remember the catastrophe of Palestine. It is reported that while Hitler was massacring millions of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Slavs, and people with physical or mental disabilities, he quipped, "Who remembers the Armenian massacres?" (Amos Elon, "The Politics of Memory," New York Review of Books, October 7, 1993) Hitler was wrong and the Zionists were wrong. The Armenians remember their genocide,

Jews remember their holocaust, and the Palestinians remember their Al-Nakbah (catastrophe).

As the state of Israel celebrates this year its golden jubilee, the Palestinians are commemorating 50 years of dispossession. We gather here to call into remembrance the agony of a nation whose aspirations to independence were crushed without having committed any crime to deserve the long and excruciating suffering.

We do not deny that anti-semitism is an evil perpetrated against Jews. Indeed, its ugliest expression was the Holocaust when millions of Jews were exterminated. But both anti-semitism and the Holocaust were a European phenomena. The Palestinians, however, paid the price of European anti-semitism in the creation of the state of Israel on their land. A Jewish writer recently wrote, "If the world had been just, Israel would have been founded on the ruins of Berlin and Hamburg...." (*Ha'aretz Magazine*, April 3, 1998, p.5).

During the last 50 years, Israel convinced many people in the world, especially the Western countries of the authenticity of its own version of the story. It set itself up as the party that is interested in peace and the Arabs and Palestinians as the warmongers. It stereotyped the Palestinians and surrounded them with all kinds of myths. It negated their existence and undermined their identity. It tried its best to make them invisible and categorized them as mere refugees.

One of the most blatant myths which Israel succeeded in spreading in the West was that the land of Palestine was empty when the Zionist Jews came and claimed it. Speaking to a group of university students in Haifa, Moshe Dayan, a former Israeli Minister of Defense confessed, "There is not one single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population" (*The Link*, January-March 1998, p. 13).

Another myth was that the Palestinians simply fled in 1948 out of their own volition. Even if it were true, do people who flee from danger lose their rights to home and property? Yet this is precisely what Israel has propagated all along. However, Jewish revisionist historians during the last ten years have documented the fact that most Palestinians were expelled by force. It is appropriate in this context to hear the testimony of one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of this century, Martin Buber. Writing to his fellow Jews in 1961 he had this to say:

Only an internal revolution can have the power to heal our people of their murderous sickness and causeless hatred. It is bound to bring complete ruin upon us. Only then will the old and young in our land realize how great was our responsibility to those miserable Arab refugees in whose towns we have

settled Jews who were brought from afar; whose homes we have inherited, whose fields we now sow and harvest; the fruit of whose gardens, orchards and vineyards we gather; and in whose cities that we robbed, we put up houses of education, charity, and prayer while we babble and rave about being the 'people of the book' and the 'light of the nations' (*The Link*, January-March 1998, p.13).

These are the words of an honest person who had courage and integrity to speak the truth to his people. His words sum up the tragedy of Palestine. We cannot, however, dwell on the past and allow it to cripple our determination to work for a better future. What can we then say as we look at the present and anticipate the future.

The Faith Perspective

We are people of faith. We believe in the One God. We believe in the God of justice, truth, mercy, and peace. Throughout history God, through the prophets, has challenged people of power who disregarded his laws and committed injustice against others to repent and to turn from their evil ways and do what is righteous and good. In the words of the prophet Micah, God calls us as people of faith "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before him" (Micah 6:8). In the words of the prophet Amos, God challenges us to "let justice run down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

In the biblical concept of jubilee, God expects that those things that have gone wrong in the land should be set right at jubilee time. The slaves must be set free, the debts of the poor must be forgiven, the land should go back to its lawful owners. In the 50th year God demands the proclamation of liberty to all the people of the land (Leviticus. 25:10). In our various religious traditions, God has always shown a special concern for the weak and the oppressed people of the earth. In his inaugural speech in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ saw the core of his message as proclaiming "good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed" (Luke 4: 18-19).

As people of faith we cannot disregard the fact that the will of God is for justice to be done in order for people to live in peace and security. So today, in this year of jubilee, we proclaim in the name of God justice and liberation for the Palestinians. We proclaim the need to end the occupation of the whole of the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the whole of the Gaza Strip. We proclaim the need to release all prisoners, the return of the refugees and the full reparations and compensation to all those who cannot be repatriated, and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state

along side the state of Israel with Jerusalem as a shared capital. Equally at this time of jubilee, we affirm Israel's need for security; but we believe that security is the outcome of a just peace. As the prophet Isaiah had said, "Everywhere in the land righteousness and justice will be done. Because everyone will do what is right, there will be peace and security forever" (Isaiah 32:16-17). The motto is no more simply land for peace, it must be, a sovereign Palestinian state in exchange of security for Israel.

Applying the Faith Perspective

Finally, I call on all of us to make three commitments:

1. A Commitment to Truth and Justice:

Our faith tradition exhorts us to search for the truth, to speak it, to commit ourselves to it and confront people of power with it. People in power who oppress others and commit injustice live in the illusion that no one will find out the truth. Our faith teaches us that you cannot hide the truth forever. The truth rises from the dead, emerges from the darkness, and confront the perpetrators and those in power. Those who think they can deceive God and white wash their crimes are fools. Indeed, I want to thank God today for all of those men and women (many of whom are with us here) be they Muslims, Jews, or Christians, Arabs and expatriates who have shown a commitment for upholding the truth.

Our challenge to people in power in Israel is to face history truthfully, admit the injustice, and show willingness to make amends. In a recent article published in *Ha'aretz Magazine* (April 3, 1998) entitled "Everything we wanted to forget", Arie Caspi ends the article with the words, "Reconciliation between us and the Arabs will happen only if we admit to ourselves the wrong we have done to the Palestinian people". The truth known and accepted has a way of setting us free. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32) Those who refuse to face and acknowledge the truth will continue to be enslaved by deception and falsehood, they become victims of defensiveness, constantly straining to conjure up justifications and rationalizations. The truth, however, is liberating and opens the way for forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

Yet, peace and reconciliation cannot be imposed by force. The Oslo peace process has been perceived by many as a way of legitimizing the injustice without admission of wrong. To admit wrong does not mean the elimination of the state of Israel. It means taking responsibility for one's action and a commitment to restitution. It means the humanization of Israel and the end of its arrogance. It means the embracing of a new future together. The pressure should be exerted on Israel from the international

community, including governments, churches, mosques, synagogues, in order to admit that it has done an injustice and is now willing to make amends. We want Israel to survive, but it can only survive on the basis of truth and justice.

2. A Commitment to Forgiveness and Reconciliation:

Remembrance of tragedies must not necessarily be synonymous with hatred and love of revenge. We refuse the human instinct that seeks an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth as a way for the restoration of justice. We commit ourselves to non-violence. We need to learn from the grave mistake of many Israeli Jews who have abused the memory of the holocaust and who continue to live in a victim's mentality. It is this victim's complex that allows some of them to see the Palestinians as Nazis and, therefore, justify the injustice against them.

Recently I read about a letter which Menahem Begin wrote to President Reagan during the Israeli invasion to southern Lebanon in 1982. He wrote that when the Israeli tanks were entering Beirut it was as if they were entering Berlin to catch Hitler. As a Palestinian I hope our people will never live in the spirit of revenge and in a victim's mentality complex. Indeed, Israel has victimized us but I hope we will never turn around and victimize others. I hope we will never build Nakbah museums in order to perpetuate feelings of guilt. I hope we will never try to silence people's honest criticism of the Palestinian government.. Furthermore, we must not let the memory of injustice dominate our future and cripple us. Once justice is achieved we must move on and be open to forgiveness, mercy, and healing. We want our children to live in peace and freedom along side Jewish children. The future of our society and the destiny of our people lie in healing the wounds and in hope for a better future. It does not lie in hatred and revenge. I hope and pray that we will be filled today with the determination to continue the non-violent struggle for justice so that an enduring peace will be achieved and a genuine reconciliation be experienced.

3. A Commitment to Live in peace under God:

We must proclaim the good news that Palestinians and Jews can live together in peace in Israel and Palestine. The land itself, as is true of the whole world, belongs to God. We are only stewards of it. We can live in peace under the One God. God is the God of peace. The problem of living together in peace today is not a problem with God but with us. We must shed our exclusive claim of God. God does not belong exclusively to any of us. We belong to God, our creator, liberator, and sustainer. The first revolution that needs to take place is a spiritual one within us. It has to do with the way we have come to conceptualize God and the neighbor. Any narrow concept of God that excludes and negates the other, even when the other is the enemy, must be rejected. God is bigger and greater than all of our conceptions of him. We must have

the vision of a God who calls us in mercy and love to live together as neighbors, Palestinians and Jews, in peace.

Again let me quote the Jewish writer Arie Caspi whose words seem specially pertinent in this regard. Addressing his fellow Jews he writes, "We will achieve peace on the day we accept in our hearts that Palestinians belong to the human family. On the day Israeli soldiers manning a barrier hesitate to shoot at an Arab car, as they would hesitate to shoot at a Jewish one. On the day that Arab refugees are equal to Jewish refugees. On the day that no Arab child dies from a stray bullet, even if he and all his friends were throwing stones at soldiers. Then we will suddenly learn that the argument over territory is not as difficult as we thought." Translated into our language of faith this means "Love your neighbor as yourself". It is then that peace will become a joyful and welcomed reality and all of God's people in the Middle East will live in peace and security. Let us with the help and power of God commit ourselves to achieve such an end so that God will be glorified. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek and the Rev. Dr. Michael Prior confer after the May 2 service.

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Other UK Activities

by Janet Davies

In May there was a special opportunity in Scotland to learn more about Israeli and Palestinian issues and solutions. Sharing a platform in both Glasgow and Edinburgh were Prof. Marc Ellis, Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek, and Prof. Yasir Suleiman. It was enlightening to hear Jew, Christian and Muslim speak in complete accord.

In the week preceding the Scottish engagements, Marc Ellis carried out a tour in England - sharing his insights through lectures in Oxford, Birmingham, Cambridge, and three venues in London. (The tour was organized by Friends of *Sabeel* - United Kingdom.)

His message - that the State of Israel's objectives for the Land are revealed in the "Sharon Map". This does nothing other than carry the bantustan idea to its sterile

conclusion. The areas of Palestinian autonomy are restricted and chopped-up, both geographically and politically. The result - certainly nothing you could call a state.

The one viable alternative - Jews must start with a confession. Acknowledge that Jews' pain, dislocation, and hurt have been turned into the humiliating, dislocating, and hurting of another people. We find that this is bad for the oppressors as well as the oppressed.

The confession would be a bridge to granting equality to the Palestinians; it would enable Jews to see their shared history. Israel has never existed as only Israel - there has always been a larger Palestinian reality. With this vision we can end the cycle, and begin to move into a shared, peaceful future.

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"Greater Jerusalem" - the Plans

On June 21 Netanyahu's cabinet approved a plan to create a "Greater Jerusalem". It involves a huge expansion of the City, taking in several West Bank settlements: Giv'at Ze'ev, Ma'ale Adumim, Betar, and Efrata. In addition to damaging the peace process, the plan would annex some 10,000 acres of agricultural land and nature reserves west of the present City limits.

What will become of the unique City of Jerusalem? Indeed, with so much damage in view, why has the plan seen the light of day? Its aim, undisguised, is nakedly racist! An analysis showing that the growth rate of the Palestinian population was outstripping that of the Jews, apparently led Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert to react with this "emergency plan to fortify Jewish control over Jerusalem".

From the Jerusalem Post, Friday June 26, 1998, courtesy Kirschen.

[Rest taken from June 26 Palestine Report, Charmaine Seitz article.]

"There is now underway a tremendous expansion, an explosion of settlements", says Geoffrey Aronson, Director of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, Washington DC. In 1997, new construction was started on 93 of the 130 already-existing West Bank settlements. While Netanyahu publicly insists that there has been no new settlement expansion, Aronson considers 13 of these construction sites as new settlements because of their scope and distance from other Israeli communities.

The growing settlements are now a crucial part of Jerusalem planning. Aronson says the expansion of Kiryat Sefer and Givat Ze'ev increased the settler population directly north of Jerusalem by 10% in the first 10 months of 1997. While these settlements remain part of the West Bank, their growth links them with Jerusalem, makes them more viable and increases the possibility of their eventually connecting with and becoming bedroom communities of the growing city. After all, huge Israeli government subsidies make living in these hilltop settlements attractive and cheap.

What else do the Jerusalem planners have in mind? A network of bypass roads, not intended for Palestinian use, have prepared an infrastructural grid for Israeli communities to come. While construction on the planned Jabal Abu Ghneim (Har Homa) settlement to the south of the city has been stalled due to international pressure, there are also plans to build "settlement x" on the hill nearby. The two settlements combined could house as many as 12,000 people. That means by the year 2020 Bethlehem could be completely engulfed in settlements, says Allison Hodgkins, Jerusalem affairs analyst.

Even more far-reaching is something called the E-1 plan, already approved by the Israeli cabinet. E-1 would connect Ma'ale Adumim with French Hill. This effectively cuts off the last open corridor from the West Bank to the economic center of Jerusalem. According to Jan de Jong, Dutch cartographer, the E-1 plan would make it possible to add 800,000 people to Greater Jerusalem. He sees this plan as permanently crushing the Palestinian influence on the city.

Analysts agree that the municipality's final map looks grim for Palestinians. "Greater Jerusalem is going to completely bisect the West Bank", says Hodgkins. "It's important to remember that Jerusalem was to remain separate according to international law. The Israeli annexation of the city is illegal."

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Snapshots of Our Activites

Clergy Programs:

Clergy meetings resumed with fresh vigor after the third international *Sabeel* conference.

The meeting in May was held at the Greek Orthodox club in Ramallah, in order to facilitate the participation of priests from the West Bank. As it was Ascension season, Father Edward Tamer presented reflections on this topic. For the newcomers - warmly welcomed by all - the meeting seemed to reflect the following verse in action: "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:35)

On June 12, a group of twenty clergy and lay people from Jerusalem and West Bank met with an equal number of Galilean brothers and sisters at The House of Grace in Haifa. It was a stimulating reunion of old friends who renewed their dreams of ecumenism and service for all. A delicious meal prepared by the women's committee at The House of Grace, shared with all the household in a beautiful spirit, concluded a very pleasant and fruitful encounter. *Sabeel* is grateful to Kamil and Agnes Shehadeh for their warm and generous hospitality.

A stop at Mt. Carmel en route from Haifa to Jerusalem.

The past three years of clergy meetings prepared the ground for the announcement of the first local ecumenical clergy conference, to take place in early 1999. We are excited at the prospect of this new gathering which will provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of ministry and spirituality for the 21st century.

Ecumenical Dinner:

On May 7, 1998 *Sabeel* held its second ecumenical dinner at the Ambassador Hotel in Jerusalem. Over 120 people - parish priests and members of their communities - representing the Armenian Orthodox, Episcopal, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox churches, exchanged the greetings of the season: "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed." These are the time-honored words Christians in the Middle East use between Easter and Ascension whenever they meet.

The expressions of faith varied between messages and traditional hymns sung by choirs and soloists. One further step in the "*Sabeel*" (way) for unity!

Groups:

During the past three months *Sabeel* was pleased to welcome some 500 people who converged on our center in order to meet with Palestine's "Living Stones".

It is noteworthy to mention that not all visitors are foreigners. A 55 person group from the American Ramallah Federation - Palestinians by origin - arrived in the country with young volunteers from Project Hope. They are searching for the truth, their roots, and ways of becoming directly involved with Palestine, and especially with their own home town of Ramallah.

We welcomed old friends of *Sabeel* as well as newcomers, pastors, interracial groups, professors & students from theological seminaries and from schools of archeology. They came from England, Scotland and Wales, from Sweden, Norway, Switzerland,

Australia, the USA, Canada, Jamaica, and South Africa. *Sabeel* expresses its appreciation for all the groups and their leaders, and is grateful for their concern and generous contributions to our work. May our visitors' experience be a real eye-opener helping them move forward in their commitment to work for truth and justice.

Congratulations!

Sabeel extends its heartiest congratulations to the Rev. Dr. Brian Leathard, who has accepted to chair FOS-UK (*Friends of Sabeel* UK). Brian has been actively involved with *Sabeel* in Jerusalem for many years: leading groups on visits here, and attending our conferences. Janet Davies continues as Coordinator of FOS-UK.

Seminars, Lectures & Workshops:

1. A group of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding (EMEU) led by the Rev. Dr. Don Wagner concluded their fact-finding trip in the area with a visit and workshop at *Sabeel*.

EMEU was concerned about Christian-Muslim relations in light of the recent rumors flying around, claiming there is Christian persecution by the Palestinian National Authority. ([Please see relevant articles.](#))

2. "Jesus and the People of God." This is the theme that the Rev. Dr. N.T. Wright addressed in a lecture to a local and expatriate audience of about 100 people. The *Sabeel* director welcomed Dr. Wright and the Rev. Dr. Peter Walker, both well-known British theologians; then Peter Walker introduced Dr. Wright as the Dean of Lichfield Cathedral and the author of several publications (among which are: *The New Testament and the People of God*, and *Jesus and the Victory of God*).

The lecture proved to be of special interest to the audience because of its relevance to the ongoing struggle in the Middle East. As a result, the *Sabeel* center - recognizing the great significance of the subject, plans to publish the full transcription of Dr. Wright's talk as a separate booklet.

3. The Wales group seminar. Valerie Martin - Social Responsibility Officer for the Church in Wales - accompanied by a select group spent 10 days in the country, during which time they met with *Sabeel* in Bible Study sessions, long term planning, and also socializing. The Wales group and *Sabeel* together look forward to the prospect of further exchange and traveling workshops. (See [Wales Group Visit](#) for a fuller report.)

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Photo Exhibit Tours - Locally and in Australia

The *Sabeel* photo exhibit began its tour through Palestine and Israel in late April. It made its first showing since the *Sabeel* conference at the Friends Boys School in Ramallah in April. In May it traveled in the Galilee to Majd al-Krum, Ibillin, Nazareth, and Haifa. In June the exhibit was shown in Akka, at the LAW conference in Jerusalem, and the Orthodox Club in Ramallah. About 4,000 people have viewed the exhibit during the tour. Most of the venues organized other exhibits, lectures, and similar events commemorating Al-Nakba (the 1948 'Catastrophe') along with the exhibit.

The exhibit tour has provided a good opportunity for people to learn more about the *Sabeel* movement; and for those of us in the Jerusalem area to understand better the specific problems that Palestinians living within Israel must deal with.

The greatest number of people attended the exhibit in Nazareth, and we are excited about the way the movement is growing in this large Palestinian center. The Nazareth *Sabeel* committee is working hard and expanding the work being done there.

We want to thank everyone at all of the host organizations for their hospitality during our stay and for their hard work at promoting greater awareness of "Qissatuna" - our story of Al-Nakba: the events of the last 50 years and continuing today.

During the months of July and August the exhibit will be touring in Bethlehem, Birzeit, Nablus, Jaffa, Lydda, and Ramleh.

Toward the end of August, two additional versions of the exhibit will start touring Australia.

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations in this issue are from the New Revised Standard Version (NSRV).