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SUICIDE BOMBERS:

What is theologically and morally wrong with suicide bombings?

A Palestinian Christian perspective

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PREAMBLE

The issue of Palestinian suicide bombings has become a familiar topic to many people throughout the world. It is easy for people, whether inside Israel/Palestine or outside to either quickly and forthrightly condemn it as a primitive and barbaric form of terrorism against civilians; or condone and support it as a legitimate method of resisting an oppressive Israeli occupation that has trampled Palestinian dignity and brutalized their very existence.

As a Christian, I know that the way of Christ is the way of nonviolence and, therefore, I condemn all forms of violence and terrorism whether coming from the government of Israel or from militant Palestinian groups.¹ This does not mean, however, that all Christians believe in nonviolence. On the contrary, so-called Christian nations in the West have waged some of the bloodiest wars in history and have been responsible for the worst atrocities and violations of human rights.

Having said that clearly, it is still important to help the readers, whether Palestinians or expatriates, to understand the phenomenon of suicide bombings that tragically arises from the deep misery and torment of many Palestinians. For how else can one explain it? When healthy, beautiful, and intelligent young men and women set out to kill and be killed, something is basically wrong in a world that has not heard their anguished cry for justice. These young people deserve to live along with all those whom they have caused to die. This article is, therefore, addressed to all people of conscience urging them to work for a speedy termination of the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories. Such an act will, most certainly, bring this tragic phenomenon of suicide bombing to an end and ensure security for both Israel as well as Palestine.

Since this article is intended for a broad and diverse readership, it has not been easy to decide on the best format. It generally follows the principles of liberation theology thus moving from context to theology. Be that as it may, the hope is that it will inspire the reader to become an “aggressive” advocate for the RIGHT OF BOTH PEOPLES to live in freedom and security. So far, this right has been denied to the Palestinians, hence the resistance to the occupation with all its multi-faceted forms including suicide bombings.

THE BACKGROUND

The Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip took a very important turn since the early 1990's. Young Palestinian men, and more lately women,² started to strap themselves with explosives making their way to Israeli Jewish areas whether crowded with soldiers or civilians and blowing themselves up killing and injuring dozens of people around them. Between the beginning of the second intifada in September 2000 and until Wednesday, June 19, 2002, Palestinian militants carried out 56 suicide bombings in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank including Jerusalem, as well as inside Israel killing, according to Israeli statistics, 225 Israelis including soldiers, men, women, and children.³ In the same period, the Israeli army killed 1645 Palestinians including police, men, women, and children.

To discover the root causes one needs to consider the background. For the last thirty-five years, the Palestinians have been engaged in resisting the occupation of their country. The whole of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem came under Israeli occupation in the war of 1967. It has not been a benign occupation as Israeli propagandists claim. It has been an oppressive military domination. Today over three million Palestinians are longing for independence and freedom. Instead, most of them are under siege and are subjected to curfews and humiliation. Israel has been consistently confiscating their land and building exclusively Jewish settlements on it, restricting their movements, demolishing their homes, devouring their water resources, and controlling

every aspect of their life.

The Palestinians have tried through different methods to shake off the occupation but to no avail. For many years they have worked through the international community to bring an end to the Israeli occupation but they have been unsuccessful. Indeed, the United Nations has been powerless to implement its many resolutions on Palestine. In 1987, the Palestinians rose up in a largely nonviolent uprising to shake off the occupation and achieve independence. Although this first intifada caused many people in the world to become aware of the Palestinian plight, it did not bring about the desired result.

After the Gulf War, the Palestinians went to the Madrid Conference in October 1991 with the hope that it would lead to the implementation of UN resolutions 242 and 338. Instead, the negotiations took a circuitous route and opened the way to the Oslo Peace Process in 1993. With enthusiasm on

the part of many, and skepticism on the part of others, most Palestinians entered the Peace Process with the hope that it would lead them into a negotiated settlement with their Israeli neighbors. People expected that the presence of the Palestinian Authority with its democratically elected leadership would certainly enhance that process. Instead, Oslo led to entrenching the Israeli domination system, the deterioration of Palestinian economic life, increase in the confiscation of their land, and the deepening of their oppression.

With the apparent failure of the Peace Process, the second intifada started in September 2000 using nonviolent as well as armed resistance against the occupation. Israel heightened its intransigence and intensified its oppressive policies. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that the second intifada was also indirectly pointed at the Palestinian authority that failed to deliver a just peace. Or at least, it was a defiance of its authority. Most of its active perpetrators were extremist militant Palestinian groups who were critical of Arafat's policies. In other words, it is possible to say that the anger of the people was directed not only against Israel but also against the Palestinian Authority that seemed unable to curb the injustice. With the increase of Palestinian resistance, there has been an immeasurable increase in Israeli oppression. Every aspect of Palestinian life worsened as the Israeli army escalated its malevolent policies against them. It has become a slow but steady process of strangulation of hope, greater despair, and deepening hate. Without understanding this background, it is difficult to grasp the evolution of the phenomenon of suicide bombings.



Child at Prayer

THE UNDERLYING CAUSES: An attempt to understand but not to justify

Historically speaking, the Palestinians did not begin their resistance to the occupation with suicide bombings. These came at least 25 years later when the political and security situation deteriorated considerably; and when it became certain that the international community is powerless to implement its own resolutions. There were no suicide bombings before the Oslo Peace Process. It is the result of despair and hopelessness that started to set in when an increasing number of Palestinians became frustrated by the deepening Israeli oppression and humiliation. As an illustration, one can cite the story of Abdel Baset Odeh who blew himself up in the Park Hotel, Netanyah last March 2002 killing 28 Israelis and tourists and sparking the largest Israeli incursion in the West Bank since 1967 - Operation Defensive Shield.

Six months before, Odeh was prevented by the Israeli authorities from crossing into Jordan to get married to his fiancée from Baghdad. The Israeli Shin Bet (security intelligence) kept sending after him. He refused to go because he suspected, as often happens, that they would blackmail and pressure him into becoming an informer. He was 25 years old, ready to get married, start a family, settle in Jordan, and enjoy life. When everything was shut in his face and his future plans were shattered by the Israeli army, he turned to suicide

bombing. His father attributed his son's action to humiliation and a broken heart. His family first heard about the bombing from the TV.⁴

Such stories abound in the Palestinian community. They all include one or more basic elements resulting from humiliation by the army, and/or seeking revenge for the killing or injury of a relative or a friend, desperation and frustration from the oppressive Israeli occupation, unemployment and confinement, imprisonment and torture, hopelessness, racism, discrimination, as well as other reasons.

In other words, these young people were not born "terrorists". No one is born a terrorist. They were born in the image and likeness of God. They were born human beings with love of life and freedom. All of them, with no exception, were born under the Israeli military occupation. The only Jews they knew were Israeli soldiers carrying guns and dehumanizing them. It was in the crucible of the occupation that they were shaped and formed. And if Israel labels them as terrorists, they are, after all the product of its own making.

Moreover, these young Palestinians did not blow themselves up because they simply wanted to commit suicide. Before 1993, they were resisting the occupation of their country through the traditional methods available to them. All they wanted was the end of the occupation and the establishment of their own state along side the state of Israel. However, with increasing Israeli oppressive and punitive measures against them — the use of helicopter gun ships

to assassinate Palestinian leaders, F-16 fighter planes to kill people and destroy homes, the mushrooming of military checkpoints to control and humiliate people, closures and siege of Palestinian cities and towns, army incursions into Palestinian areas, and much more — suicide bombings came to be perceived as a more potent tool of resistance that can reciprocate the pain and hurt they were experiencing. And as they were driven deeper into despair, their desire to hit back in any way possible grew in intensity. From a Palestinian perspective, therefore, the real sequence of the cycle of resistance has been this: Israeli occupation, Palestinian resistance, greater Israeli oppressive measures, and greater attempts on the Palestinian side to increase the resistance, and the vicious circle goes on.

Besides the basic political injustice and the oppressiveness of the occupation, there are four major areas that constitute the breeding ground for suicide bombers. To begin with, many young men have become permanently unemployed. Even when other older men were able to find employment within the pre-1967 borders in Israel, most young men were barred from entering because Israel considered them a security risk. During the second intifada, the unemployment rate soared to an alarming 75% in some quarters. This led to the fact that approximately 65% of the Palestinian population was living below the poverty line. It has been extremely difficult for many people to find any form of work. Unemployment creates frustration and despair, and could lead to extreme action.

Moreover, it is the young men more than others who are humiliated, harassed, and provoked by the Israeli soldiers. Some of the worst humiliation takes place at checkpoints. The occupied areas have become infested with them. Some reports have mentioned more than 180.⁵ Many of them have become permanently fixed, others are arbitrarily mounted at whim. The occupied territories have been literally segmented into numerous small cantons where it is impossible to move from one area to another without running into military checkpoints. It takes hours to pass through areas that normally take a few minutes. Humiliation is perhaps one of the worst methods used by Israel to dehumanize the Palestinians. It is clearly a policy that strips people of their self worth and dignity. It is directed at all echelons and age groups of Palestinian society.

Furthermore, there is hardly any Palestinian family in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that has not experienced some kind of pain or injury. Many families have lost their loved ones - a spouse, a sibling, a child, a relative, or a close friend. The level of bitterness and hatred keeps rising daily. Almost every aspect of Palestinian life is controlled by the Israeli army and many people have lost the ability to dream of a better future or envisage a better life. Therefore, the desire to avenge their wasted life, take revenge against the occupation, and at the same time take away with them as many Israeli lives as possible becomes an objective.

There is another group of young Palestinian men and women that must

be mentioned. Many of these have been arrested and tortured in Israeli prisons and "concentration" camps. In fact, Israeli prisons have become the "factories" for creating and "manufacturing" collaborators.⁶ Young men are detained for indefinite periods of time and are pressured into becoming spies and collaborators. They are simply trapped and some of them do not know how to shake it off. This phenomenon causes some of them to exist in constant self-contempt and scorn for having betrayed their own people. Forced

... there is hardly any Palestinian family in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that has not experienced some kind of pain or injury.

collaboration has stripped them of their self worth. They are ready to become suicide bombers in order to purify and redeem themselves and express their utmost loyalty and patriotism for their country and people.

To sum up, these young people's daily life has become an experience of death. It is vividly symbolized in the daily funerals of their colleagues that they have to attend. Indeed, many of them feel that Israel has practically pronounced a death sentence on them. It is only a matter of time. Death is surely coming to them whether through a slow economic strangulation, or harsh political negation, or daily personal dehumanization. Since they have been stripped of their human dignity, their only possibility for existence is to exist

as slaves under an Israeli apartheid system of domination. They feel they have no options and very little to lose. Consequently, they are willing to give themselves up for the cause of God and the homeland (watan) believing that with God there is so much to gain.⁷

From the perspective of those who believe in and carry out these suicide operations, there is a simple and plain logic. As Israeli soldiers shell and kill Palestinians indiscriminately, Palestinian suicide bombers strap themselves with explosives and kill Israelis indiscriminately.⁸ They perceive every Israeli as the enemy who has robbed them of their land and is responsible for their misery. If Israel can carry its incursions with the most sophisticated American-made war machinery, the Palestinians carry out their resistance with even the most elementary crude homemade explosives. If Israel drives its tanks to destroy and devastate Palestinian areas, the suicide bombers use their own bodies as tanks and shells to destroy and devastate Israeli areas. If the oppressors have the heart (or should one say lose the heart) to kill women and children and to make the life of Palestinians miserable, the suicide bombers are not going to spare Israeli lives as well.

Moreover, Sharon has insisted repeatedly that Israel is involved in a war with the Palestinians. In war, soldiers give themselves up on behalf of their country whether their country is the aggressor or fending aggression. Officially speaking, some countries argue that the Palestinian suicide bombers are not proper soldiers that belong to an internationally recognized state and their resistance, therefore, cannot be considered legitimate. Some Palestinians

would, however, argue that if what is going on is a war as Israel claims it is, then in war the whole nation is mobilized and different militia groups become engaged in resisting the occupation of their country as happened in France during the 2nd WW. Furthermore, in war, most armies and militias do not always comply with codes of war ethics and many civilians as well as military are killed.⁹ Some have argued that the suicide bombers are also fighting a war and killing as many of the enemy as they can so that the psychological warfare can create panic and fear as well as contribute to weakening and capitulation. In this same vein, how does one view the US atomic bombing of two major cities in Japan during the 2nd WW and the killing of over 170,000 most of them civilians?

The militants go on to argue that what they are doing is precisely like a soldier in battle who carries a heroic act by storming a club within a military camp and blowing himself up killing soldiers as well as women and children who happen to be enjoying a party. If one looks at it in this context of warfare, then it happens all the time. No war has been free from such acts and its actors were labeled heroes and were awarded medals posthumously. They were not called terrorists. In the West such acts are deemed heroic, but in Islam, due to the close ties between God and country, they are given a religious character and the people involved are considered "shuhada" (martyrs); their act is martyrdom and its prize is paradise rather than a human military medal. When one considers it from this angle, then being engaged in war and the defense of one's homeland, these militants would argue, the suicide bombings could be a legitimate way of resistance.

Evangelical Christians Letter to the U.S. President

July 2, 2002

Dear Mr. President,

We write as American evangelical Christians concerned for the well-being of all the children of Abraham in the Middle East — Christian, Jewish and Muslim. We urge you to employ an even-handed policy toward Israeli and Palestinian leadership so that this bloody conflict will come to a speedy close and both peoples can live without fear and in a spirit of shalom/salaam.

An even-handed U.S. policy towards Israelis and Palestinians does not give a blank check to either side, nor does it bless violence by either side. An even-handed policy affirms the valid interests of Israelis and Palestinians: both states free, economically viable and secure, with normal relations between Israel and all its Arab neighbors. We commend your stated support for a Palestinian state with 1967 borders, and encourage you to move boldly forward so that the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for their own state may be realized.

We abhor and condemn the suicide bombings of the last 22 months and the failure of the Palestinian Authority in the first year of the intifada to stop the violence against Israeli citizens. We grieve over the loss of life, particularly among children, and the suffering by Israelis and Palestinians. The longer the bloodletting continues, the more difficult it will be for both sides to reconcile with each other.

We urge you to provide the leadership necessary for peacemaking in the Middle East by vigorously opposing injustice, including the continued unlawful and degrading Israeli settlement movement. The theft of Palestinian land and the destruction of Palestinian homes and fields is surely one of the major causes of the strife that has resulted in terrorism and the loss of so many Israeli and Palestinian lives. The continued Israeli military occupation that daily humiliates ordinary Palestinians is also having disastrous effects on the Israeli soul.

Mr. President, the American evangelical community is not a monolithic bloc in full and firm support of present Israeli policy. Significant numbers of American evangelicals reject the way some have distorted biblical passages as their rationale for uncritical support for every policy and action of the Israeli government instead of judging all actions - of both Israelis and Palestinians - on the basis of biblical standards of justice. The great Hebrew prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, declared in the Old Testament that God calls all nations and all people to do justice one to another, and to protect the oppressed, the alien, the fatherless and the widow.

Finally, Mr. President, be assured of our prayers for you and your cabinet as you lead our nation in this troubled time. May the strength and peace of the Lord be with you.

Sincerely,
(Signatories are 43 leaders of the Evangelical community)

A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

The suicide bombings become a more powerful phenomenon when their religious underpinnings are emphasized. According to Hamas leader, Khaled Mash'al, there are three main reasons, namely, the religious, the nationalist or patriotic, and the humanitarian. The latter means that the suicide bomber sacrifices himself in order for his people to live.¹⁰ It is difficult to determine whether the religious dimension followed and enhanced the political decision for its use or whether the religious significance preceded and prompted it. It is most likely that both went hand in hand since any Palestinian killed by Israel whether a militant or an innocent bystander was regarded as a martyr. Consequently, groups like Hamas were referring to these acts not as suicide bombings but as "martyrdom operations" and "martyrdom weapons"¹¹. Nationalism and faith have been fused together and imbued with power. People regarded the suicide bombers as martyrs and that paradise awaited them. Their rewards include forgiveness, companionship with the prophets, friends of God in heaven, and intercession on behalf of their families on the Day of Judgment.

In one of the sermons preached by Sheikh Isma'il al-Adwan and broadcast on Palestinian TV, the Sheikh said, "The shahid, if he meets Allah (Arabic for God), is forgiven his first drop of blood; he's saved from the grave's confines; he sees his seat in heaven; he's saved from judgment day; he's given seventy two dark-eyed women; he's an advocate for seventy members of his family."¹² Be that as it may, these martyrs believe they are fighting for the cause of God and their place in heaven is, therefore, guaranteed. An important quote from

the Qur'an in this regard is, "Count not those were slain in God's path as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided."¹³

Other Muslims argued strongly that Islamic law forbids the killing of non-combatants and therefore, the killing of innocent Israelis is wrong. Imam Yahya Hendi is a Qur'anic scholar who is the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University. In his website¹⁴ he gives a Qur'anic view of Jihad, martyrdom, and terrorism and violence. On Jihad, he emphasizes the personal form of jihad which is the intimate struggle to purify one's soul and spirit from sin. This Jihad takes precedence over the physical jihad in which Muslims wage wars against oppression and transgression. He quotes the verse "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors."¹⁵ This verse speaks of a defensive war that is waged to stop the aggression but not to go beyond it. "The idea is that justice prevails. You don't fight because you enjoy fighting, but because there is an oppression." The implication being that it does not involve the killing of civilians.

On martyrdom, Imam Hendi says clearly that those who die in the service of God are martyrs, "...though that service needs to be of a different sort than that provided by terrorists." He gives a number of illustrations. "Suppose I'm on the pulpit teaching and giving my sermon, if someone shoots me because of what I'm saying about God, the Qur'an says I'm not really dead because I'm with God. If I'm feeding the poor, and calling for justice, I can't be called dead. My soul is alive and God sustains me.... So to claim martyr status, all terrorists have to do is convince themselves that they are fighting for 'justice,' which is, of course, highly subjective....[Terrorists] think if they hurt Americans, they serve the cause of

justice. They use these [Qur'anic] verses". Imam Hendi says that the Qur'an has many verses about martyrdom that must not cause harm to others. He quotes prophet Muhammad as saying, "Do not attack a temple, a church, a synagogue. Do not bring a tree or a plant down. Do not harm a horse or a camel..."

Finally, Imam Hendi has a section on terrorism and violence. He clearly states that, "the Qur'an doesn't condone terrorism, though Muhammad was the leader of a military force and therefore used violence.... While there are passages in the Qur'an, like the Old Testament of the Bible, that celebrate military victory, the overall gestalt of the Qur'an promotes a more restrained view.... '...We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people'¹⁶ ... This passage places a great value on the sanctity of a single life. 'If you kill one person it's as if you kill all humanity'" says Imam Hendi. He ends this article with the words, "the Qur'an goes one step further in chapter 8, verse 61, 'But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah.'¹⁷

Hamas Perspective

The suicide bombings have been carried out by four militant Palestinian organizations. These are: Hamas, Al-Jihad Al-Islami (Islamic Jihad), Kata'ib Al-Aqsa, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The first two are religiously based while the third is mainstream and connected with Fatah. The latter two are left wing and secular. It is significant to point out that the

Anglican Peace and Justice Network Statement on the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

August 12, 2002

As members of the Anglican Peace and Justice Network from many parts of the world, we express our deep dismay at the continuing impasse between Israelis and Palestinians and deplore the unbroken cycle of violence which has claimed too many innocent lives on both sides. We condemn violence whatever the source.

We reach out to Palestinians and Israelis of good will, assuring both of them of our love and support in ending this long and troubled conflict. We embrace all those who have lost loved ones in the violence and extend our deepest sympathies.

In looking at this deeply troubled conflict we recognize that a primary cause of the present violence is the continuing Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza imposed by Israel which inflicts humiliation and suffering on the Palestinian people, inflaming passions and breeding further violence. Collective punishment of the Palestinian people must be brought to an end.

We are deeply troubled by the use of U.S. made weapons and aircraft provided to Israel and being used for attacks on civilian targets as demonstrated July 22 in Gaza and urge a moratorium on the use of such weapons which violate U.S. law.

We support the following steps in order to achieve a sovereign and independent Palestine living alongside a secure Israel recognized by and at peace with her neighbors:

- the withdrawal of Israeli Armed Forces from all Occupied Areas in accordance with 1967 borders and a complete halt to settlement building, both new or expanded, to be followed by a process of phasing out settlements altogether
- the introduction of an international peacekeeping force under the auspices of the United Nations, European Union, Russia and the United States into the Occupied Territories charged with maintaining security so that both sides may be free from further attacks
- a humanitarian effort led by the United Nations to provide relief to the suffering Palestinian people
- the immediate resumption of negotiations involving Israel and the Palestinian Authority under the umbrella of the United Nations, European Union, Russia, the United States and the Arab League
- that negotiations be based on United Nations resolutions 242 and 338 that results in a viable and sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital as well as the capital of Israel, and assures the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

The unconditional recognition of the state of Palestine must be hastened if peace is to prevail in the Middle East.

Rather than threaten Iraq with invasion which further fuels anger and hatred during these already volatile times, we call upon President Bush and Prime Minister Blair to intervene and resuscitate the peace process as a direct action of healing and reconciliation for the global community.

We call upon the faith communities, and especially the Anglican Communion, to a time of focused and intentional prayer for peace in the Holy Land. We also call on the leadership of the Abrahamic Faiths from around the world to exercise a ministry of presence in the region as a gesture of solidarity with the people. We urge that they exercise their authority and influence on the political leadership among the several nations who carry the responsibility for making a just peace.

Popular Front did not carry out any suicide bombing except after Israel assassinated its secretary general Abu Ali Mustafa on 27 August 2001.¹⁸

A variant Islamic view is expressed by Khaled Mash'al, one of the leaders of Hamas. In the same interview on Aljazeera satellite TV station on June 29, 2002, Khaled said that had the international community done justice to the Palestinians, there would have been no reason for it to resort to martyrdom operations. He considered these operations as very effective. He mentioned several reasons. The cumulative number of casualties and losses which Israel cannot continue to sustain; their impact in causing the emigration of Jews out of Israel; the rise of the unemployment rate in Israel and the worsening of its economy; the low morale of the people; but most of all, the fact that the Israeli army does not have a weapon that can match these operations.

In other words, militant Islamic groups saw the suicide bombings as a powerful weapon that inflicted not only a heavy human toll but also a psychological trauma affecting a large segment of Israeli society and exposing Israel's vulnerability. Indeed, the suicide bombings shook the Israeli state and caused widespread panic and terror. Consequently, Israel heightened its media warfare against the Palestinians, locally and internationally, comparing its predicament to that of the United States in its fight against terrorism; and comparing Palestinian "terrorism" with that of Osama Ben Laden and his Al-Qa'ida network. Israel did not mention its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and domination of a whole nation. Therefore, many people in the West, especially in the United States fell in the Israeli trap not discerning the great difference between what has happened in the United States on September 11 and what is happening to a people who have been subjected to a harsh and brutal occupation.

In fact, it is important to point out that with the tremendous imbalance of military power between the Palestinians and Israel, some Palestinian militants have commented that due to the effectiveness of the suicide bombings there has been a relative balance of fear. The casualties on the Palestinian side was approximately four times higher than on the Israeli side but the suicide bombings brought an equalizing effect in the spread of fear and terror within Israel thus raising drastically the number of Israeli casualties. For those who believe in the armed struggle, such statements are considered significant. It reflects that the weak are not as weak as they seem to be; and the strong are not as strong as they think they are.

Mash'al mentioned that 120 persons have already given themselves up for the sake of God and the homeland. Half of them were university graduates and most of the rest are graduates of high school and only few who only finished primary school. Another Hamas leader reported on TV that 75% of all the Israelis killed by Palestinians were killed through suicide bombings. And if Israel wanted to call it 'terrorism', so be it. Did not Yitsak Rabin, the late Prime Minister of Israel, himself call terrorism the weapon of the powerless?¹⁹

EFFECTS AND OUTCOME

Although Israel was deeply hurt by suicide bombings, the consequences that the extremists were hoping would happen did not take place. One can ponder the following:

1. Israel had many more options than the Palestinians thought they did. As it turned out, Israel had a good number of military options; and due to its successful media campaign, everything it did was justified as self-defense. In spite of its gross violations of international law including the

perpetration of war crimes, it got away with it and managed to escape the censure of the international community. Israel did not exhaust all its options, while the Palestinians had very few.

2. The West Bank is not southern Lebanon. Hizballah was, indeed, successful in driving the Israeli army from southern Lebanon after 22 years of occupation. According to the 1919 Zionist map, southern Lebanon was clearly envisioned as part of the future Israeli state. So was most of the eastern side of Jordan. Israel recognizes, however, that not everything envisaged is realizable. It made its calculations and withdrew from Lebanon. Undoubtedly, Hizballah's resistance played a crucial role, but there were other factors. The West Bank is different. Religious Jewish settlers and right wing Zionists find strong biblical and historical roots in the West Bank and it will not be easy to evict them from there. The presence of the illegal settlements is one of the most difficult issues in the struggle for peace.
3. The United States is the only great world power today and has an unflinching commitment to the well-being and security of the state of Israel. It will come to its rescue politically, militarily, and economically whenever it is needed.

4. Israel was successful in its media campaign internationally. Many countries in the world are against suicide bombings.

5. The Israeli society did not crumble economically in spite of hardships.

6. The vast majority of the Israeli people, perceiving the struggle as a fight for the very existence of the state of Israel, supported Sharon and his right wing policies.

PALESTINIAN CONDEMNATION

Although suicide bombings were condemned by some Palestinians

including the Palestinian Authority, they were accepted popularly by many as a way of avenging the Israeli army's daily killings of resistance fighters and innocent Palestinians. And while the American government rushed to condemn suicide bombings and expected the same from the Palestinian Authority, Israel's killing of Palestinian leaders and ordinary civilians did not abate and passed as self defense and was un-condemned publicly by the United States.

Be that as it may, it is important to reiterate clearly that the Palestinian community is not totally in support of the suicide bombings. Although there are Palestinians who are sympathetic, many have denounced them. On

Wednesday, June 16, 2002, 58 Palestinian men and women, Muslims and Christians, among whom are well known personalities, signed a public statement published by the most read Arabic daily, Al-Quds asking for a halt to all suicide bombings. They made it clear that such operations only widen and deepen the hate and resentment between Palestinians and Israelis. It also destroys the possibility for the two peoples to live in two states side by side. The statement mentioned that the suicide bombings are counterproductive and will not lead to the fulfillment of the Palestinian national aspirations. It only allows Israel to justify its increasing vicious attacks on Palestinian towns and villages.

The statement was published in the paper on five consecutive days before it was transferred to the website with hundreds more signatories. Over 500 people expressed their desire to see a termination of any suicide operations.

ISRAELI REACTION

There were voices inside Israel that were calling for more drastic and severe measures to curb the suicide bombings. One of those was Gideon Ezra, the deputy public security minister who openly on television on August 19, 2001, called on his government to execute the families of Palestinian suicide bombers. He argued that if potential suicide bombers know that their families will be wiped out then they will refrain from committing the act. Apparently, Ezra was basing his suggestion on a Nazi practice that used to arrest and inflict suffering on the families of those who were suspected of undermining the state. Historian Moshe Zimmerman of the Hebrew University has stated that under the Nazis if someone shot a German soldier and was not caught, fifty people would hang. Shockingly, Ezra's words did not draw any protest or criticism from the Israeli government.²⁰ Certainly, not all the voices inside Israel are as extreme as Ezra.

By contrast, there are courageous voices that called on their Israeli government to examine its harsh policies against the Palestinians that breed suicide bombings. In one case, Rami and Nurit Elhanan lost their 14 year-old-daughter who was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber in September 1997. In spite of the tragic loss, the parents became actively involved in peacemaking. They blamed the Israeli occupation calling it "a cancer that is feeding terror". "Israel is becoming a graveyard of children. The Holy Land is being turned into a wasteland." "Our daughter was killed because of the terror of Israeli

This ad appeared in Al Quds, the local Arabic newspaper of Jerusalem, for five days in a row, in mid-June of this year. Each day it reappeared with additional signatures. In the end, there were over 500 signatories. This is a translation of the original advertisement provided by the Arab Media Network.

Urgent Appeal to Stop Suicide Bombings

Needless to say, the signatories of this appeal strongly condemn all the Israeli oppressive measures perpetrated against our people including the policy of incursions, assassinations and siege. We affirm that the occupation is the root cause of the tragedy of our people and resisting it is both a right and a responsibility.

We the undersigned feel that it is our national responsibility to issue this appeal in light of the dangerous situation engulfing the Palestinian people. We call upon the parties behind military operations targeting civilians in Israel to reconsider their policies and stop driving our young men to carry out these operations. Suicide bombings deepen the hatred and widen the gap between the Palestinian and Israeli people. Also, they destroy the possibilities of peaceful co-existence between them in two neighboring states.

We see that these bombings do not contribute towards achieving our national project that calls for freedom and independence. On the contrary, they strengthen the enemies of peace on the Israeli side and give Israel's aggressive government under Sharon the excuse to continue its harsh war against our people. This war targets our children, elderly, villages, cities, and our national hopes and achievements.

Military action is viewed [sic] are not assessed as positive or negative exclusively out of the general context and situation. They are assessed based on whether they fulfill political ends. Therefore, there is a need to re-evaluate these acts considering that pushing the area towards an existential war between the two people living on the holy land will lead to destruction for the whole region. We do not find any logical, humane, or political justification for this end result.

occupation. Every innocent victim from both sides is a victim of the occupation.” In spite of the fact that Rami’s grandparents, aunts, and uncles perished in the Holocaust, he said, “The pain of losing our beautiful daughter is unbearable, but our house is not a house of hate...”. Nurit said, “ Hamas take power from the anger of people. If you restored people’s dignity, honour and prosperity by ending occupation, Hamas would lose power”. The couple established the Bereaved Family Forum with Izzat Ghazzawi, a Palestinian whose 16-year old son Ramy was killed by Israeli troops.²¹

Another example is that of Shamaï Leibowitz who on June 27, 2002 wrote a letter entitled, “An Israeli Officer’s Response To President Bush”. He introduced himself in the following way, “I am an Orthodox Jew and a criminal defense attorney in Tel Aviv. I am also a tank gunner in reserve duty, and part of a group of 1000 soldiers who have refused to serve in the occupied territories. Many of them were imprisoned in military jails in the past few months.” Then he added the words, “Now that President Bush has enlightened us with his new ‘Plan’ for the Middle East, we can only wonder how long it will take him to realize that

his plan is useless and meaningless....”. “His [Bush’s] failure to understand that no progress can be made while a whole nation [Palestinian] is being brutally occupied is the basic flaw in this policy... Bush fails to comprehend that the suicide bombings are a product of mass starvation and humiliation of the Palestinian people. Bush’s aides are doing us so much harm by refusing to acknowledge that only an immediate end to the Israeli occupation will bring an immediate end to the Palestinian uprising.”

“We are now witnessing a situation in which 3.5 million people have no future, no hope, no vision, other than to become terrorists and avenge the continued harassment and shelling by the Israeli army’s helicopters, tanks and artillery. While Bush has never set foot in this region, we have been living here, watching how the Palestinians were trampled and denied basic rights on a daily basis, besieged and occupied in every possible way. Our Jewish sources teach us that where there is no justice, there is no peace.... Most Israelis know deep in their hearts that once we stop humiliating and oppressing this nation, we will return to become a safe and secure democratic Israel living next to a viable Palestinian State...”.²²



A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The dictionary’s definition of martyr is “one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce a religious principle; one who makes great sacrifices for a cause or principle; one who endures great suffering.” From their political and religious perspective, the suicide bombers have made the supreme sacrifice, the offering of themselves for their faith (in the way they understand God) and for their homeland.

In Arabic, the verb “shaheda” means to witness. “Shahid” is a martyr that is a person who has suffered death as a witness to his faith or the principles he/she stands for. In the Palestinian struggle, it has been used to refer to those Palestinians killed by the Israeli army as well as for those who voluntarily sacrificed their life for Palestine. The death of a “shahid” including those suicide bombers became a cause of pride for the family though that in itself does not lessen the pain and grief of their loved ones.²³

In English the word for martyr is derived from the Greek “martus” and like the Arabic simply means, a person who has given himself up as a witness. It was first used in the early Christian centuries to indicate the witness for Christ of the early apostles. When Christians were persecuted the word started to refer to those who underwent some form of suffering for their faith. Eventually, it was used exclusively for those who died for the Faith.²⁴

In discussing suicide bombings from a religious perspective, it is worthwhile to reflect, though briefly, on the story of

Samson. His story occupies four chapters in the book of Judges (13-16). Many Christians have been held spellbound when they, as children or adults, heard its fascinating details. It is a story of a strong young man who rose up to save his people who were oppressed by the coastal powerful neighbor, the Philistines.²⁵ Obviously from the perspective of the Israelites he was regarded as a hero and a freedom fighter while from the perspective of the people of power, namely, the Philistines, he was, in today's language, a terrorist.

According to the story, Samson was very successful in his brave adventures against his enemies. Eventually, he was captured by the Philistines and tortured. They pulled out his eyes and kept him in jail. In order to celebrate their victory over their archenemy, Samson, the Philistines brought him to a big event attended by three thousand men and women including their five kings. His final act of revenge took place when he pushed the two main columns of the building and pulled it down killing himself and all the attendees. Samson's final prayer seems very similar to the prayer of a suicide bomber before he blows himself up. "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes."²⁶ Our purpose can well be served by a barrage of questions.

Read in the light of today's suicide bombers how do we evaluate the story of Samson? Was not Samson a suicide bomber? Was he acting on behalf of the God of justice who wills the liberation of the oppressed? Was God pleased with the death of thousands of men and women of the Philistines? Are we confronted with many similar stories

today in the experience of suicide bombers? Is it legitimate to tell the story today by substituting the name Ahmad for Samson? Is it possible that the God of justice is as active today in working out the liberation of the oppressed Palestinians through the likes of Ahmad? Is the dynamic under which God operates that of Jew versus other people or is it that of oppressor versus oppressed? Do we see the divine involvement of God in one story and not the other? Is the story of Samson legitimate because it is written in the Bible while the story of Ahmad is rejected because it is not and therefore he is condemned as a terrorist? Do we have the courage to condone both as acts of bravery and liberation or condemn both as acts of violence and terror? Is not injustice considered injustice whether inflicted by the ancient Philistines against the Hebrews or by the modern state of Israel against today's Palestinians? Or do we hold a theology of a biased God who only stands with Israel whether right or wrong?²⁷

Although some people in our Palestinian community admire the sacrifice of the suicide bombers and view it as the penultimate in the offering of oneself for the sake of the homeland and the liberation of the people; and although we understand its deeper motivation and background, we condemn it from both our position of faith as well as a legitimate method for resisting the occupation. Our reasons are based on the following points:

1. We condemn suicide bombings because they are a crime against God. Ultimately, it is only God our creator who gives us life and who can take it. Therefore, the sixth commandment, "you shall not murder" applies as much

Will the Voices of Peace

Be Heard?

Excerpts from the essay by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr.

In the Middle East, the Israelis and the Palestinians are locked in lethal embrace. Attack generates reprisal and reprisal generates new attacks. Neither can afford to let the other go. Violence generates more violence; terror generates retaliatory terror.

Yet the reality is that the vast majority of people on both sides of the conflict want to live in peace. The vast majority suffers from the violence. Israel's occupation and offensive has laid waste to what little infrastructure there was in the Palestinian territories. But Israel's economy too is in ruins, crippled by terrorism, fear and the costs of violence. Both sides have become so focused on the means of waging the conflict - terror bombings against assassination policies, suicide strikes against surgical strikes - that they have lost touch with the end that both desire: security and peace. And this end requires, inevitably, that they live next to one another in peace at the end of the day.

In the American South under segregation, the costs of repression and occupation burdened the entire South. Its economy was backward; its education system crippled; its attractiveness blunted. You can't keep a person in the gutter unless you lay there with him.

What saved the South was a non-violent movement, led by a figure from the church, Dr. Martin Luther King. It broke the cycle of violence and hate. It allowed the two sides locked in the gutter of segregation to find a way out - without killing one another.

Similarly in South Africa under apartheid, repression generated violent reaction that generated more repression. It was a figure of the church, Bishop Tutu, who waging non-violent protest transformed the way the world, and ultimately the South Africans viewed the situation. Again, a non-violent movement pointed the way out. And Nelson Mandela, upon his release from prison, understood and took leadership in that movement of forgiveness and reconciliation. An unimaginable transformation took place without violence.

Now in the Middle East, leaders of the church must be heard, calling for a new movement of non-violence, showing a way out for both Israelis and Palestinians.

to murdering oneself as it does to murdering others. If it is a crime to shed another person's blood, it must be equally criminal, if not more seriously so, to shed one's own blood. If the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as we love our own selves, then to kill oneself is a greater sin since it eradicates the basis for loving the other. Suicide is a sin against God who has blessed us with the gift of life.²⁸ Those who love God do not kill themselves. Moreover, those who love God do not kill themselves for the sake of God. Indeed, they should be ready to die and even be killed for God's sake, but they will not do it themselves.

Christian history is full of examples of people who suffered torture and death rather than renounce their faith and love of God. In the New Testament, we have only one case of suicide and that was Judas Iscariot.²⁹ Although we understand the reasons behind his suicide, we believe that he committed a sin. Instead he should have repented of his crime in betraying Jesus and would have certainly received forgiveness. It is true, we do not find anywhere in the Bible a condemnation of suicide but the implication is that it is God who gives and takes life. Later on, the church condemned it. Inference was made from passages such as I Corinthians 6:19-20 where Paul writes, "...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body". And Ephesians 5:29, "For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church...".³⁰ The person who has committed suicide was considered the only true atheist who has no faith or

hope in God and who has totally given up on life. Probably this is why traditionally the church did not allow those who committed suicide to have church burials. Taking one's own life was considered a sin against a loving, creator God.

One can look at it from another angle. According to the Gospels, Jesus Christ knew that he was going to die in Jerusalem. "...The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and killed...".³¹ Yet he did not try to escape from danger but set his face

We condemn suicide bombings because they are a crime against God. Ultimately, it is only God our creator who gives us life and who can take it

to go to Jerusalem where he was killed. We believe that he voluntarily offered himself for the sin of the world. We see his death as vicarious and redemptive. He said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."³² This means that to give oneself on behalf of others is the greatest sacrifice of all. Christians believe that this is precisely what Christ has done. He died for us. Although one offers oneself to die, he does not pull the trigger and kill himself. He is open to sacrificing himself for the cause but he is not the one who does it.

2. We condemn it because we believe that we must refrain from inflicting suffering or death on others. From a Christian point of view, the tragedy lies in the fact that these young men and

women do not only kill themselves, they cause the death of others many of whom are civilians and innocent. We must hasten to add that we equally condemn the state of Israel's killing of Palestinians. Indeed, it constitutes the underlying cause of the conflict. Be that as it may, from our position of faith we say that even when the cause for which a person kills himself/herself is noble, as it is in the case of Palestine, nothing justifies the killing of innocent people. Christ accepted suffering on himself and did not inflict it on others. When we intentionally inflict suffering and death on others and generate untold suffering on their relatives, we are sinning against God and neighbor.

In fact from a New Testament perspective, when Christians suffer, it should make them more compassionate for the suffering of others rather than bitter and vengeful. The greatest form of bravery is, therefore, to bear suffering rather than to inflict it. In the struggle for civil rights in the United States, Martin Luther King Jr. recognized the heavy price that needs to be paid for freedom but refused to accept any violent method to achieve it. He said, "Rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood"...."King insisted on the teaching of Jesus and Gandhi that unearned suffering is redemptive. The willingness to suffer is the utmost expression of human freedom".³³ If the choice is between inflicting suffering on others or bearing suffering, it is better to accept suffering on oneself rather than inflict it on others. This is tantamount to taking the high moral ground in the conflict, the very thing that we as Christians must take. Furthermore, for the Christian, suffering endured can serve as evidence to Christ's victory over

suffering and death.³⁴ It can also be a way of exposing the evil and the injustice that must be resisted.

3. We condemn it because we believe that when we are confronted by injustice and evil, we must resist it without using its evil methods. We must endure suffering when inflicted upon us by unjust governments. We bear it but do not accept, submit, or succumb to it. Nonviolent resistance is an important tool for using against the enemy. Violence only breeds violence. Some Christians have developed nonviolent direct action as a method of resisting unjust governments and systems. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed it well when he wrote: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that".³⁵

The Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is evil and unjust. It must be resisted for the sake of both the oppressed as well as the oppressors. It is our faithfulness to God that drives us to work for justice and for the ending of the occupation of Palestine. But it must be carried out through nonviolence no matter how long it takes. It is only nonviolence that can guarantee the restoration of the humanity of both when the conflict is over. Moreover,

nonviolent resistance contributes to a speedier process of reconciliation and healing because it does not impinge on and violate the human dignity of people.

4. For the Christian, the supreme example is Christ. "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly."³⁶ This is not passive resignation. It is total surrender to the God of justice who established this world on justice and who is going to make sure that injustice does not have the last word. This does not mean, however, that we must not combat injustice and resist it, but it means total surrender and faith in the God who will ultimately vindicate us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has often said that this is a moral world and God will not allow injustice to continue.³⁷

We reject any understanding of God that reflects war, violence, or terrorism. The God that we have come to know in Jesus Christ is a God of peace, mercy, and love. Moreover, God is a God of justice, but God's justice is not expressed in violence or in terrorizing people. God's justice is expressed supremely in love, peace, and forgiveness.

We condemn suicide bombings because they are trapped with the same violent logic exercised and perpetrated by the Israeli government. It is based on the law of revenge expressed in "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". Although it is very difficult for us as humans, we are still encouraged as Christians to seek a higher law. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'. No, 'If your

enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads'. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."³⁸

5. It is probable that Prime Minister Sharon (and the right wing religious extremist ministers and settlers around him including some Christian Zionists) believes that the war against the Palestinians can be justified biblically because he is doing exactly what Joshua did in the Old Testament. Therefore, as Joshua's actions pleased God so must Sharon's actions. Similarly, the suicide bombers believe that by blowing themselves up and killing those around them they are fighting in the cause of God by ridding their land of the injustice inflicted on it by "infidels," and so

earning for themselves a place in paradise.

Our basic problem with both lies in their concept of God. We reject any understanding of God that reflects war, violence, or terrorism. The God that we have come to know in Jesus Christ is a God of peace, mercy, and love. Moreover, God is a God of justice, but God's justice is not expressed in violence or in terrorizing people. God's justice is expressed supremely in love, peace, and forgiveness.

6. In the midst of the injustice, suffering, and death inflicted on us, we believe that God in Christ is there with us. Christ is not in the tanks and jet fighters, fighting on the side of the oppressors (although many Jewish and Christian Zionists believe that), God is in the city of Gaza, in the Jenin camp and in the old city of Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem suffering with the oppressed.³⁹ God has not abandoned us. We reject suicide bombings because, from a Christian perspective, they reflect feelings of total despair and hopelessness. We must never lose hope. Our hope must be anchored in God who is ultimately our savior and liberator. The words of the psalmist are very apt to our situation, “I say to God, my rock, ‘why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?’ As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘where is your God? Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God’”.⁴⁰

7. We condemn suicide bombings because they practice, in essence, collective punishment against people many of whom are civilians. They are guilty of the very things Palestinians detest in the Israeli government. When suicide bombers commit collective punishment, they become what they loathe. One of the most hated and resented acts of the Israeli army is its exercise of collective punishment against the Palestinians. It is possible that the protagonists of suicide bombings would say that collective punishment is not intentional or deliberate. It is an unfortunate collateral that comes with the resistance. This is basically the same rationale that Israel gives when it

imposes curfews, siege, and closures on hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Whatever justification the government of Israel or the perpetrators of suicide bombings may have, the end result is what counts. Innocent people are harmed and killed. When the Israeli army incarcerates whole towns for long periods of time or a suicide bomber blows himself up in a market place and indiscriminate killing ensues, both are collective punishment directed at largely innocent people. Consequently, the basic principle must be affirmed: it is unjust and immoral to punish people collectively.

Whatever justification the government of Israel or the perpetrators of suicide bombings may have, the end result is what counts. Innocent people are harmed and killed

Moreover, if the Israeli government carries out collective punishment frequently, that should not be an excuse for Palestinians to follow suit. The old question expressed by Abraham to God regarding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah continues to persist today, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”⁴¹ When that is done, it is a crime. To punish people indiscriminately, including the elderly and the sick, women and children, is one of the most savage and brutal behaviors exercised by people of power in the past as well as in the present.

In its primitive religious form, one can

find examples in the Old Testament where God warns the ancient Israelites that he will punish the “children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation”.⁴² In another story, Achan disobeyed Joshua’s order and out of greed took some of the spoils of war that were forbidden. Although Achan confessed his sin, he was taken, at the command of God, “with his sons and daughters, with his oxen, donkeys, and sheep, and his tent and all that he had...and all Israel stoned him to death; they burned them with fire, cast stones on them...”.⁴³ Tragically, acts of collective punishment have been wrongly attributed to God by humans in order to justify their own beastly behavior against their fellow human beings. Such acts, basically contradict our concept of the God of mercy and love. Even God’s justice is not void of mercy.

At the time of the exile, several hundred years later, many people believed that God did not deal with them justly; that they were suffering for the sin of others. They could only express it in the words of a popular proverb, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”.⁴⁴ Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel began to articulate a different theology that essentially said, only “the person who sins shall die”.⁴⁵ It was a reversal of long held beliefs. Unfortunately, throughout history, people in power, whether religious or not, continued to exercise the indiscriminate punishment of people and justify it by giving it divine sanction.

In modern times, the United Nations’ Fourth Geneva Convention clearly prohibits collective punishment. Article 33 of the Convention makes it clear that “No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not

personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or terrorism are prohibited.” We know that the government of Israel practices collective punishment in order to control and bring the Palestinians into submissiveness — the extended curfews, the detention of large numbers of people for lengthy periods for alleged offenses, the destruction of homes, and many other methods. Suicide bombings whether deliberate or not perpetrate collective punishment. They are punishing all Israelis for the evil policies of their government. Some Palestinians, as already indicated, might justify it due to the heavy oppressive nature of Israel’s occupation; or link it to human nature’s propensity to retaliate by inflicting as much pain and damage against the enemy. In spite of all of that, it is important to lift up the moral and

ethical principles of international law, namely, that collective punishment is wrong and must be stopped at all cost.

8. Although people may be ready to die for their faith or even for their country they need to do everything they can to stay alive and witness in life rather than kill themselves. So long as they are alive, they have the opportunity to witness to the truth. Indeed, they need to remain faithful until death⁴⁶ but they must not give up on life and kill themselves. Their life is a gift from God and they must not destroy it. We must live the life we have to its fullest. Christ has come so that we might have life and that we might have it abundantly.⁴⁷ To end one’s life abruptly is to end the opportunities God presents us with, and the possibilities of contributing to the building of a better society. Standing before Pilate Jesus said, “For this I was

born and for this I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth”.⁴⁸ People in power tried to kill the truth by killing him, but he did not kill himself. When they killed him, the truth could not be silenced. It was revealed and exposed more widely.

We reject suicide bombings because we believe in life before death as well as life after death. In spite of the despairing situation, these young men and women deserve to live. Many times, even though life around us is difficult and frustrating, one can give and receive joy and love with family and friends. Even in the darkest of hours, it is possible to find some beauty and inner peace. Many times when things are very gloomy, it is possible to find some contentment in the service of others. Life can always offer new opportunities and it is worth living.

A Call to Corporate Responsibility

Excerpts from statement by Tom Cordaro, Pax Christi USA, former National Council Chair, August 7, 2002

Pax Christi rejects the path of violence as a means of achieving peace, understanding that genuine peace will only be possible when the root causes of the conflict are addressed through the application of international law. We echo the words of Pope John Paul, who urged, “It is time to return to the principles of international legality: the banning of the acquisition of territory by force, the rights of peoples to self-determination, respect for the resolution of the United Nations and the Geneva Conventions. For there to be a true and lasting peace in the region we believe that negotiations should ultimately lead to a sovereign, viable Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as the capital of two states, accessible to followers of the three monotheistic religions.”

While Pax Christi USA condemns the violence of suicide bombers who hold both the Israeli and Palestinian people hostage to this unending cycle of violent retribution, we believe that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem is the fundamental dynamic that fuels the conflict.

One of the more odious aspects of life under Israel occupation is the policy of home destruction. Since the occupation began in 1967 Israel has destroyed 7,000 homes leaving 30,000 Palestinians homeless. Currently, 7,300 Palestinian family homes in East Jerusalem have been designated as “illegal” by the Israeli authorities and are in danger of being destroyed. The vast majority of homes destroyed is conducted for administrative reasons and cannot be justified under international law. In addition, the Israeli military will often destroy the homes of families of suspected terrorists as a form of collective punishment.

The Israeli policy of home destruction is met out to all Palestinians with no regard to class or religion. We are especially concerned with the small and struggling Catholic Palestinian Church, which also suffers under the occupation. In his Lenten letter, Bishop Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and the President of Pax Christi International pleaded with the Israeli authorities, “Destroy our churches but spare the homes of our faithful. If you must impose, at any price, collective punishment and if their needs to be a ransom in order to procure the tranquillity of innocent children and families, we offer our churches. Destroy them; we will find other places in which to pray and we will continue to pray for ourselves and you.”

CONCLUSION

Our faith motivates and drives us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.⁴⁹ We cannot condone suicide bombings in anyway or, for that matter, any use of violence and terror whether perpetrated by the state or militant groups. By the grace of God, we must always try to take the high moral ground in any conflict. We must not allow ourselves to succumb to hate or walk the road of vengeance and malice. As we continue to struggle for justice, peace, and reconciliation in Israel/Palestine, we must keep lifting up the prophetic vision of a world without violence. A world where people (Israelis and Palestinians) will “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; [where] nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”.⁵⁰ This vision is realistic

and achievable. Israelis and Palestinians can live together in peace if Israel will be willing to share the land with them and accept the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.

Unfortunately, the present policies of the government of Israel, and those internationalists that support those policies, do not lend themselves to such a peace. In fact, Israel is creating Bantustans (homelands, reservations) for the Palestinians and an Israeli form of apartheid that is much worse than what was practiced in South Africa. Today it is Israel that is creating and breeding extremism on the Palestinian side. Indeed, the occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip continues to be the root cause of the violence and terror. This cycle of terror perpetuated today is simply shutting the door on the future for both people. It is killing not only the present but the future. We must guard against

murdering the future. That will only shut the door to healing and reconciliation.

Ultimately, there cannot be room for hate if we want to live together. And live together we must. The sooner we put an end to the occupation the better our life will be. Ending the occupation will certainly end the suicide bombings. All peace-loving people, whether people of faith or not, must exert greater concerted effort to work for the ending of the occupation. Ultimately, justice will prevail, the occupation will be over, and the Palestinians, as well as the Israelis, will enjoy freedom and independence.

How do I know that this will take place? I know because I believe in God.

The Reverend Dr. Naim Ateek is the director of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem

Notes

1 The American State Department defines terrorism as “Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”. In the American definition, terrorism can never be inflicted by a state. This is a useful definition because, as Brian Whitaker writes, “it gets the US and its allies off the hook in a variety of situations. The disadvantage is that it might also get hostile states off the hook - which is why there has to be a list of states that are said to ‘sponsor’ terrorism while not actually committing it themselves.” Under the State Department rules, if Palestinians attack a Jewish settlement with mortars it is considered terrorism. If, however, the Israelis rocket attack a Palestinian community it is not because Israel is a state and states can never inflict terrorism (www.guardian.co.uk), May 7, 2001. To say that states cannot inflict terrorism, betrays a lack of understanding of the depth of evil in our world and the direct involvement of many states in violence and terrorism. One wonders, is there really a clean and civilized

“terrorism” committed by states and a dirty and barbaric “terrorism” perpetrated by militant groups? Palestinian daily experience has shown that it is the Israeli state injustice perpetuated through violence and terrorism against the Palestinians that has created and prompted its Palestinian counterpart. Ultimately, it boils down to whose definition it is. As Brian Whitaker has written in the same article that a more honest definition of terrorism is this: “Terrorism is violence committed by those we disapprove of”.

2 Out of 105 suicide bombers, three have been women.

3 Suzanne Goldenberg, “A Mission to Murder: Inside the Minds of the Suicide Bombers,” *The Guardian* (UK), June 11, 2002. Since June 11th, the statistics have changed. As of August 1, 2002, 241 Israelis have been killed by suicide bombers; and total Israeli casualties are 593 (www.idf.il/daily). Number of suicide bombers who have died is 105 (www.phrmg.org). Total Palestinian casualties as of August 1, 2002 are 1682 (www.miftah.org/report.cfm).

4 Khaled Abu Toameh, “Love and Hate,” in *The Jerusalem Report*, May 20, 2002, p. 27.

5 In an article entitled, “The Growing Hardships of Traveling in the West Bank,” *The Applied Research*

Institute, Jerusalem (July 2002) had given the following statistics on checkpoints: On the West Bank, 34 permanent checkpoints and 150 road blocks; in the Gaza Strip, 7 permanent and 7 road blocks. See www.ari.org

6 *The Phenomenon of Collaborators in Palestine*, PASSIA Publications, March 2001.

7 Apparently, some suicide bombers volunteer while others are recruited. The desperate political situation makes it relatively easy to have scores of candidates. The preparatory stages are in effect accomplished by the Israeli army itself. It starts when these young people are traumatized, then brutalized, and eventually dehumanized by the impact of the occupation. Once they reach that stage, they become easy recruits.

8 Some militant Palestinians would object to the use of the word “indiscriminate”. They would say that they do not target children. A Hamas member stated, “There is nothing easier than putting a bomb in a school or sending a person with an explosives belt into a school, and the fact that Hamas has never done so, is evidence that they do take moral considerations into account...but in Israel, all of the civilians are soldiers, really. That’s how we see it...” Amira Hass, “Driven

by vengeance and a desire to defend the homeland," Ha'aretz, July 16, 2002, p. 4.

9 Scholars tell us that civilian deaths average 50% of all deaths in any given war. In the 1980's the percentage jumped to 74% and in the 1990's to 90%. It is estimated that in the 20th century 109 million people were killed in the different wars, approximately half of those were civilians. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (Doubleday, 1998), p. 137.

10 Al-Jazeera TV on 29 June 2002 in the "Open Debate" program with Khaled Mash'al.

11 See " Hamas Perspective" later.

12 Akiva Eldar, "Ask Clinton what he thinks about Camp David," in Haaretz, August 21, 2001. In an unpublished paper, Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway of Alquds University maintains that the reference to the "seventy virgins" is neither mentioned in the Qur'an nor in the most authentic compendia of Hadith. It is, however, found in Mu'jam Al-Tabarani.

13 Qur'an 3:169

14 www.alhewar.org; e-mail: alhewar@alhewar.com

15 Qur'an 2:190

16 Qur'an 5:32

17 www.beliefnet.com

18 Amnesty Report in Al-Quds newspaper, 11 July 2002, p. 22.

19 Arno J. Mayer, professor emeritus of history at Princeton has written in the wake of September 11, "...in modern times, acts of individual terror have been the weapon of the weak and the poor, while acts of state and economic terror have been the weapons of the strong..." Quoted by Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War For Perpetual Peace: How We Got To Be So Hated* (Nation Books, 2002), p. xi.

20 Akiva Eldar, *ibid*.

21 Alexandra Williams, "Our daughter was killed by a suicide bomber. But it is the terror of Israel's occupation that is to blame for her death," *The Mirror* (London), 25 June 2002.

22 Shamai Leibowitz, "An Israeli Officer's Response To President Bush," June 27, 2002, www.zmag.org. See also "The ethics of Revenge", a moving speech of Yitzhak Frankenthal, chairman of the Families Forum given at a rally in Jerusalem on Saturday, July 27, 2002, outside Prime Minister Sharon's residence. magazine@tikun.org. Frankenthal's son Arik was killed by Palestinians. He also blames the Israeli occupation. He writes, "We lost sight of our ethics long before the suicide bombings. The breaking point was when we started to control another nation". He adds, "The Palestinians cannot drive us away - they have long acknowledged our existence. They have been

ready to make peace with us; it is we who are unwilling to make peace with them. It is we who insist on maintaining our control over them; it is we who escalate the situation in the region and feed the cycle of bloodshed. I regret to say it, but the blame is entirely ours".

23 One of the criticisms voiced by Israel against the Palestinians and some Arab countries and especially Saudi Arabia has been regarding the payments given to the families of the martyrs. Every family receives twenty five thousand dollars. Israel considers this payment an encouragement to young men to become suicide bombers and must be stopped. Most Palestinians, however, consider the money received not as an encouragement to suicide bombers but as a support to their families. One wonders whether Israel's condemnation of these payments implies that the families of the suicide bombers should be penalized. In fact, Israel has on numerous occasions demolished their homes mercilessly. Indeed, many times the family is not even aware of what their son is going to do. It is wrong, therefore, to inflict further pain and suffering on the family by starving them to death, or destroying their home, etc. as Israel would like to do. In the history of the church, a baby born out of wedlock was not penalized and thrown outdoor to die because he/she was born in sin. The baby was baptized and received as a child of God. It is right to support and comfort the family in spite of what its son/daughter has done. If Israel is so anxious to stop the suicide bombings it must consider stopping its oppressive occupation and giving them justice.

24 It is interesting to point out that some Christians have argued that the classic definition of a martyr should be expanded to include those who have been killed as a result of taking a prophetic stand against injustice and oppression; people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, and others. These are people who have borne a witness and committed themselves to the struggle for justice and peace and consequently suffered for it. *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky, Jose Miguez Bonino, John S. Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, Pauline Webb, under "Martyrdom," by Rowan D. Crews, Jr. (WCC Publications, 1991), p. 660.

25 The Philistines are not racially or ethnically related to today's Palestinians. Some scholars believe that they were a sea people originating from the Aegean Islands and Crete. Others say that they came from the south and west coasts of Asia Minor between the 12-13th century B.C. and settled in the southern coast of Palestine. Ultimately, during Roman rule, the whole

area became known, by a slight variation of their name, as Palestine.

26 Judges 16:28

27 It is interesting that Samson's name is not mentioned among those who committed suicide in the Interpreter's Bible Dictionary. Although the word suicide does not appear in the Bible, there are people who committed the act. See for example, I Samuel 31:4-5; II Samuel 17:23; I Kings 16:18.

28 The issue of suicide in today's world is not anymore black and white. It is a complicated phenomenon. There are people who due to terminal illness or deep psychological sickness and derangement attempt or indeed, take their life. Ultimately, it is only the merciful God who can judge. I am using it here in the context of our focus on suicide bombings.

29 Matthew 27:5

30 See also Romans 14:7-9

31 Mark 8:31; Matthew 16:21; Luke 9:22

32 John 15:13

33 *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky (& others) under "Suffering," by Dorothee Solle, p.963

34 2 Cor.4: 14-18

35 From a sermon preached at Eutaw Alabama Church during the 1966 Alabama Tour. Poster produced by Community Printers and the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz, CA.

36 1 Peter 2:23

37 See highlights of Archbishop Tutu's address in a conference co-sponsored by Friends of Sabeel and the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts in Boston on April 13, 2002. "Cornerstone" issue 24, Spring 2002, p. 3.

38 Romans 12:19-21

39 An eyewitness told me that in a meeting between Israeli officials and representatives of American Christian Zionist leaders, earlier this year, the request was made to the Christians to purchase arms for Israel. The Christian Zionists agreed to do that. When we hear such stories, we wonder whether we believe in the same God of love and peace.

40 Psalm 42:9-11

41 Genesis 18:23

42 Exodus 20:5

43 Joshua 7:24b-25

44 Ezekiel 18:2

45 Ezekiel 18:20, Jeremiah 31:29-30

46 Revelation 2:10

47 John 10:10

48 John 18:37

49 Micah 8:6

50 Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3-4

Update and Appeal on the Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in Light of President Bush Speech

Palestinian Church Related Organizations

Jerusalem, June 28, 2002

With the reoccupation of Hebron on the morning of June 25th, practically all towns and cities in the Palestinian Territories, with the exception of Jericho, have come under direct Israeli army occupation. Well over two million inhabitants live under Israeli army imposed curfew for most of the time. In some localities, the Israeli army allows the inhabitants a couple of hours every two to three days in order to stock up on food and other basic commodities. Reports from all parts of the West Bank and Gaza indicate increased and abject poverty among the population and one friend who visited Nablus recently told us that he had never seen such poverty among the population and that what he saw reminded him of the spoken of poverty-stricken Nablus of decades ago. Another friend informed us that in Bethlehem there are families who practically beg for a loaf of bread for their children. But aside from wanting to meet the basic necessities that would ensure survival, the Palestinian population is held hostage by the Israeli government, as this latter wants to barter the end of suicide bombings with withdrawal from Palestinian towns and cities.

President Bush in his speech of June 24th 2002 put the entire burden on the Palestinian side in order to get out of the present impasse. By so doing, he absolved the Sharon-led Israeli government from its responsibilities of presenting a political program that would spell out or at least indicate its plans to end occupation not simply that which started in September 2000 but the original occupation of June 1967. While all of us would like to see an end to suicide bombings, achieving this could not be simply a one-sided affair, as it needs to be paralleled by Israeli expressed willingness to end occupation and live as good neighbors, and not as hegemonic occupiers and oppressors, to Palestinians. An agreed upon political framework is of paramount importance as a basis that would commit the two sides in an equitable manner as they progress towards eventual resolution of the present deadlock.

Granted, we Palestinians are in dire need of genuine reform. But such reform cannot be undertaken under the barrels of Israeli guns and tanks. The impromptu discussions that Palestinians engage in on side streets and in sitting rooms all indicate an overwhelming consensus that things need to change, not to please Mr. Bush or anybody else, but in order to spell out our own vision for our society and its future. Unfortunately, this is something we have not done since the Oslo accords and we should have. Hence a grave responsibility lies on all of us as we examine the prospects for reconstruction and rehabilitation in all areas of government and society. But as important we need to decide ourselves on our own program and political agenda whether as they relate to issues and concerns internal to Palestinian society or whether as they deal with the thorny relationships with the Israelis.

The Israelis cannot escape their responsibilities either. The absence of a clear political program by the Israeli government is tantamount to saying that military occupation would continue. The Israeli policy of destroying the Palestinian governmental and civil society infrastructure is accompanied by continued settlement activity on Palestinian lands. The Israeli government claims that it is fighting potential suicide bombers when it places hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian Palestinians all over the West Bank and Gaza under house arrest for days on end. Even relief and emergency efforts are hindered by the Israeli military from reaching the besieged population, despite claims by the Israeli government that it facilitates and does not obstruct such efforts. The trigger-happy Israeli soldiers often demolish personal and public property, cause injury and death and prohibit ordinary people as well as the sick and elderly from crossing from one locality to another within the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By blaming the National Authority for all the ills of the current situation, the Israeli government lifts off the responsibility that lies squarely on the shoulders of its Prime Minister and other Ministers for the human rights infractions that are committed on a daily and continuous basis against innocent Palestinian civilians by the Israeli occupying army. President Bush by putting the entire burden on the Palestinians to find a way out of the present deadlock mirrors the Israeli blame of the Palestinian Authority and Palestinians, in general.

Given the current situation and in light of President Bush speech, we the undersigned call on our partners and friends worldwide to:

1. Address your governments and various constituencies on the need for the Israeli government to come up with a clear plan that specifies its intention to vacate the occupied territories not simply those occupied since September 2000 but also those occupied since June 1967.
2. Ask your governments, particularly the EU governments, to adopt one stand that would insist on the need to have an Israeli commitment to ending the occupation, and to an immediate pullout from the occupied Palestinian cities and towns, as part of the process and deliberations that would lead to the creation of a democratic and pluralistic Palestinian state, in accordance with all UN relevant resolutions.
3. Stress on the Israeli government and/or its representatives abroad that the infractions that its army is carrying out in the occupied Palestinian territories and at the military checkpoints throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip go contrary to basic human rights as reflected in international declarations and conventions. The Palestinian people, in light of these continuous infractions, are in need of an international force of protection.
4. Ask the Israeli government and its representatives abroad to honor its own claims that it does not hinder relief and emergency efforts by local and international aid organizations to the besieged and curfewed Palestinian population. Note that Israel's actual behavior on the ground on this matter is contrary to the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief based on International Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Convention to which a majority of countries were signatories, including Israel.
5. Emphasize to the Israeli government and its representatives abroad that continued curfews and closures imposed on the Palestinian population not only affect adversely the economic and social welfare of the population but also contribute to psychological and pedagogical damage that would obstruct tremendously the prospects for eventual peace making between Palestinians and Israelis.
6. Address your governments and the various media on the need for the American Administration to adopt a balanced and even-handed policy towards the two parties in the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, and especially to emphasize that its present policy is causing extreme human suffering to the whole Palestinian people, and is engendering ever-lasting hatred between East and West.
7. Indicate to Palestinians your willingness to support them as they contemplate the important questions pertaining to their society and the challenges of transformations they are likely to experience in the coming couple of years.
8. Continue your support to your Palestinian partners as they strive to serve their people amidst most difficult circumstances.
9. Join hands with all those willing to work for an immediate end of Israeli occupation. Only then can an environment conducive to the eventual resumption of negotiations between the two sides be created.

We aspire for your prayers, good thoughts and action, as our country appears destined to continue experiencing the vicious cycle of occupation and counter occupation. One inspiring thought to those who not only do not see the light at the end of the tunnel but also do not see the tunnel itself in our present tragic situation: there is always light to those who care to see it and work to make it shine on the lives of the oppressed, occupied, besieged and all those who suffer because of the injustice of our situation. May all our efforts add up to end injustice.

* Judge Khalil Aboud – International Christian Committee in Israel – Nazareth

* Mr. Constantine Dabbagh – Near East Council of Churches Committee – Gaza

* Mr. Rifat Kassis – YMCA – Beit Sahour

* Dr. Bernard Sabella – Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches – Jerusalem

* Mr. Ramzi Zananiri – International Christian Committee – Jerusalem West Bank

* Commission Justice and Peace Jerusalem

* Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center – Jerusalem



Purpose Statement of Sabeel

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. *Sabeel* strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on *Friends of Sabeel* groups in your area please contact our International representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.

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