

Promised Land or Land of Promise Revisited: A look at the last three years



Mary J. Pneuman

October 2017

Bishop's Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy Land
Episcopal Diocese of Olympia
holylandjustice.org

PREFACE

My introduction to the Holy Land and the conflict between Israel and Palestine came by way of travel to Israel, Palestine's West Bank and Gaza, Jordan and the Sinai in Egypt while attending courses at St. George's College in 1994 and 1995. St. George's College is a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion that offers a year-round schedule of Biblical study and on-site pilgrimages from Israel and Palestine to Jordan and Turkey. Located in East Jerusalem, in the West Bank, it is an agency of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, which oversees 25 parishes and 25 educational and medical institutions in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon.¹

My first glimpse of Gaza came in 1994, when bright-eyed children with broad smiles welcomed us to their rubble-strewn city, still showing severe damage from the Israeli military response to the first Intifada — the Palestinian protest that began in 1989 in Gaza's Jabaliya refugee camp against the Israeli occupation. The eager welcome from these children sealed my heart with the plight of their people.

From the beginning, I have been drawn again and again to the sights and sounds of the Holy Land and the warmth and hospitality of the Palestinian people I have met over the past 22 years. In addition to pilgrimage sites and many Episcopal parishes, schools, hospitals and rehabilitation ministries in Israel and Palestine, four of my nine sojourns have included extended time as my husband Fred and I worked as volunteers in Gaza, East Jerusalem and Ramallah. From 2000 to 2016, these times have provided many opportunities to get to know both Christian and Muslim Palestinians living in the West Bank and Israel and to witness the impact of the Israeli military occupation on Palestinian life in the West Bank, as well as the effects of various forms of discrimination against Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel. Sadly, each time we visit the Holy Land, we see prospects for a just peace slipping further away. In 2016, the oppressive and dehumanizing consequences of nearly 50 years of Israeli occupation appeared much worse than in 2014, and any nonviolent resolution of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians appeared more elusive than ever.

In the spring of 2016, Fred and I spent two months in Palestine and Israel, six weeks of them as volunteers at the Evangelical Episcopal home and daycare, and the K-12 and technological schools in Ramallah, West Bank. This effort was encouraged by the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia's Bishop's Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy

¹ All Saints Episcopal Church in Damascus has been closed due to the war in Syria.

Land,² of which I have been a member since inception in 2000. By encouraging visitation, providing educational opportunities and resources, and sponsoring conferences with speakers from both Israel and Palestine, this committee seeks to help the Diocese of Olympia and greater community become informed on current events, as well the policies and politics that perpetuate the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Drawing on personal observations and conversations with Palestinians, as well as a variety of recent scholarly and media reports, *The Promised Land or the Land of Promise Revisited* represents my continued efforts to make sense of some of the confusion, contradictions and controversies that stand in the way of a lasting peace among the Children of Abraham. In *Promised Land or Land of Promise?*³ published by the Bishop's Committee in August 2014, Christian life in Palestine and the Episcopal ministries in the Holy Land were focal areas. This update provides a brief history of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and the status of the situation two and a half years later, with a focus on the current impact of the illegal Israeli occupation.

As we try to live out our baptismal covenant to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being,” I believe that we all are called to participate in the search for a just and peaceful solution to the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Understanding is the first step, and there is no better way to understand than to “come and see.” You are sure to be welcome, or as you will hear, *ablan wa sablan*.

October 2017

² holylandjustice.org

³ bishopscommittee.org/promised-land-or-land-of-promise/

INTRODUCTION

In reporting the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, American media has tended to focus on periods of intense military conflict between the Government of Israel and Hamas, the Palestinian faction in control of Gaza. In an effort to put an end to largely ineffectual home-made rocket fire from Gaza into Israeli towns and villages by Hamas militants, Israel launched three major military strikes deep into Gaza between 2009 and 2014. In these attacks, over 2,100 Palestinians, the vast majority of them civilians; 73 Israelis were killed, seven of them civilians (*BBC News*).

Since then, intermittent rocket launches from Gaza (pop. nearly 1.8 million) have prompted disproportional retaliations from Israel, most recently in May through October 2016, and February 2017, two of them resulting in civilian casualties. While Israeli airstrikes were reported by many British and Israeli media outlets (*The Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Reuters*, *Israel Times*, *Ha'aretz*, and *Al Jazeera*), US media reports were hard to find in an on-line search. In general, US news on the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where 2.9 million Palestinians reside,⁴ tends to highlight the military defense needs of the Israel and tarnishes the image of the Palestinians with a broad-brush of *terrorist*. In the West Bank, under the governance of the Palestinian Authority, no military actions have been seen.

While increased breadth of coverage in the mainstream media has been seen recently, less attention has been given to the human costs of the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since 1967 on the lives of ordinary Palestinian people. There can be no doubt that the vast majority of both Israeli and Palestinian people want what we all want — the right to life and liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and peaceful relations with our neighbors. Yet, 50 years of military occupation have denied the Palestinian people many of the basic human and civil rights that we all take for granted — freedom of movement and assembly, political representation, equal educational and economic opportunity, and freedom of expression and worship. And the occupation has denied the Israeli people that which we all seek — freedom from fear and the promise of a secure future. With few exceptions, little media attention has been given to the peacemaking efforts of the Christian churches and Palestinian and Israeli nongovernmental organizations that quietly work behind the scenes to seek common ground to bring the two sides together.

⁴ Population figures to the end of 2015 reported in *Ha'aretz* (1.16)

No one can dispute the right of Israel to protect its citizens or the right of the State of Israel to exist. Many Americans believe that prolonged conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is inevitable and beyond their control. Some Americans believe that that struggle is ordained to continue until Biblical prophecy is fulfilled and Israel reclaims the lands that God promised to the Jews. Others are confused or at least conflicted in their sympathies.

Only a small percentage of the American public has much understanding of the root causes of the conflict or the correlation between a peaceful resolution to this conflict and peace in the greater Middle East — indeed, the ultimate security of the United States and the West.

Judging from the continued failure on the part of Congress to take effective steps to encourage the conditions needed for a just and peaceful resolution, one would conclude that the opinions and decision-making of American political leaders are more heavily influenced by military or economic interests and the powerful Israeli lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) than by accurate knowledge or understanding of the “facts on the ground.” To date, decisions and actions by the US government have typically maintained the status quo or tipped the scale toward Israel, although these do not necessarily serve the best interests of either country.

In 1967, Israel imposed a military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Now there remains only 22% of historic Palestine, what is left of the 55% originally set aside for the Palestinians by the United Nations in 1947. Presently, Palestinians have civil control of only about one half of this remainder, and Israel has total military control of all borders. *NPR* (12.16) reported that nearly 10% of Israel’s Jewish population now lives in settlements in the West Bank.

The construction or expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land (or “colonization” in all but name) continues to be a bedrock issue. A hopeful note was sounded in December 2016, when the US representative to the United Nations Security Council did not veto, but abstained from an otherwise unanimous *yes* vote on Resolution 2334. This resolution affirms that all measures aimed at changing the demographic composition and status of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967 — including settlement construction and expansion, transfer of populations, and land confiscation — are flagrant violations of international humanitarian law as defined in the 4th Geneva Convention. Yet, on January 4, 2017, a resolution was introduced in the US House of Representatives (HR 263) to render UN Resolution 2334 “null and void as a matter of US law and for other purposes.” At the time of writing, this resolution has been sent to the House committee on foreign affairs.

Additional obstacles to peace posed in the early weeks of the Trump administration included consideration of relocating the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, appointment of a longtime pro-settlement activist as US ambassador to Israel, and a failure to condemn the plans recently announced by Mr. Netanyahu to build between 5,000 and 6,000 more housing units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the latter effort now linked to the possibility of annexation.

All Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, whether they live in the West Bank or the State of Israel, suffer to varying degrees the loss of basic human and civil rights, as well as the economic and educational opportunities that are accorded all Jewish citizens who live in either Israel or the West Bank. *Promised Land or Land of Promise Revisited* will focus on the effects of the most recent three years of the 50-year military occupation on Palestinian life and, especially, how rising tides of Israeli nationalism and religious fervor are making a just peace and reconciliation more difficult. An update on the Christians of Palestine is included.

CHRISTIANS IN THE HOLY LAND TODAY

All was calm in Bethlehem's Manger Square as I stood with my husband Fred among hundreds of Palestinian Christian and Muslim families while they gathered together around a 30-foot lighted Christmas tree to sing carols and enjoy the beginning of the Advent season in 2013. Throngs would come again and again over the next four weeks to share the spirit of Christmas as they prepared to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. As visitors enjoying the festivities, we understood that many Palestinian Christians would not be allowed to come to Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Jesus at the Church of the Nativity or able to travel to Jerusalem for Good Friday or Easter at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, revered as the site of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Jerusalem is off-limits to most West Bank Christians unless a special permit can be obtained. In fact, many of the Christian holy places, such as Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee — the locations of churches that commemorate the Annunciation, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Feeding of the 5,000 — fall inside the boundaries of the State of Israel. Tourists can come and go, but without special permits, West Bank Palestinians are not allowed to enter or travel freely inside Israel.

In April 2016, we visited Bethlehem during the 2nd week of Eastern Lent. Bethlehem, located in the West Bank, is cut off from Jerusalem by a 25-foot concrete separation barrier (the Wall) that encircles the city. It appeared to us that the Church of the Nativity was unusually quiet in comparison with previous visits from 1995–2014, and our pilgrimage group comprised the greater part of the congregation at a mass we attended in the Franciscan grotto of St. Catherine. The streets of the city were eerily empty, and many stores and hotels appeared to be closed. Tourism has been a large part of the Bethlehem economy, but our group appeared to be the only customers in a shop selling locally made pottery and hand-carved olive wood. Graffiti on the Wall speaks to the frustration and yearning of the people forced to live their lives hemmed inside a virtual ghetto.



Fred and I celebrated Easter on May 1, 2016, in the West Bank city of Ramallah, during our volunteer time. To preserve Christian unity, the Christian churches of Ramallah — Latin, Orthodox, Melkite, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Coptic and others — now celebrate together at Christmas as dated by the Gregorian calendar (Latin Catholic rite and protestant churches) and at Easter, as dated by the Julian calendar (Orthodox churches). Following the ancient tradition in the Holy Land, Easter is celebrated at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on the basis of both Eastern and Western calendars,⁵ but most Palestinians are unable to attend these services. The distance between Ramallah and Jerusalem is about eight miles.

Unlike Bethlehem, Ramallah is not closed off from Jerusalem by a single great Wall, but by major checkpoints that restrict free travel at all times, including religious holidays. Since they cannot travel freely to Jerusalem, residents of Ramallah and nearby villages join in the celebrations of other religious traditions. No greater was Palestinian unity more apparent than at the *Sabt al Nour* parade on Saturday before Easter Sunday, when thousands of Christian and Muslim spectators lined the streets of downtown



Ramallah to watch hundreds of Christian Scouts from 14 West Bank villages as they marched with colorful flags, drums, bugles and bagpipes in a joyful procession. For the first time in many years, Israel granted Orthodox Scouts from Gaza permission to travel to Ramallah.

This traditional procession culminates when a torch bearing the holy fire from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is allowed to pass through the infamous Kalandia checkpoint to reach Ramallah and to light candles which in turn will light the lanterns of worshippers who carry the flame to their homes. “This is a symbol for peace,” a young Palestinian Christian from Nazareth, told *Middle East Eye* (5.16) as she lit her candle. “We want peace in our lives and light. We need it.”

When we visited Jerusalem a few days after Easter, the usual bustle of clergy and nuns in their flowing vestments, pilgrims and shoppers was absent in the Christian Quarter of the Old City. Queues of worshippers at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher were remarkably short; only a few knelt to touch the anointing stone or the rough rock of

⁵ Easter 2017 was celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox and Western churches on the same day.

Golgotha, and the wait to enter the Edicule of the Tomb, revered as the site of the resurrection, was shorter than we can remember. Compared to our visit in 2014, the usual elbow-to-elbow crowds were smaller in the busy souk of the Muslim Quarter, and we were conscious of the increased presence of heavily armed young members of the Israeli Defense Force on the steps of the Damascus Gate entry to the Arab quarter of the Old City. Two years ago, many of the military, though armed, were in civilian clothes. Shopkeepers, especially those who count on sales of Christian souvenirs for their living, said sales were very slow, and many shops had been closed.

Since 2014, the number of Christian worshippers, both local and international, has fallen off significantly in Jerusalem. *The Guardian* (3.16) reported that the number of pilgrims and visitors to the Old City of Jerusalem usually peaks at Easter, but in the last two years, those taking part in the Palm Sunday procession from the Mount of Olives to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher were estimated to be nearly 10,000 fewer than in 2015. Jamal Khader, rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary, attributed the fall in the number of pilgrims to a spike in violence, government warnings, and the heavy presence of Israeli soldiers, as well as the difficulties obtaining travel permits, but “the very idea of needing permits to go to pray in the holy sites is against freedom of religion,” he said (*Catholic News Service*, 3.16).

According to Yusef Daher, secretary general of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center, the permits issued by Israeli authorities are problematic. “Often permits are issued for only some members of the family — the wife, or the children,” he said. “Some permits are issued for dead people . . . even if people have permits, they often cannot travel because of closures due to military restrictions or Jewish holidays, when only emergency medical vehicles are allowed through the checkpoints” (*The Guardian*, 3.16). The Inter-Church Center works to strengthen local ecumenical and interfaith relations and hosts the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Established in 2002 by the World Council of Churches, this program marks 15 years of bringing volunteers to accompany people in Palestine as they navigate daily routines, often under duress.

A network of police barriers that disrupt the flow and make it difficult to reach the holy sites are part of the current Israeli government’s policy of making Jerusalem an exclusively Jewish city, Daher told the *Catholic News Service*. According to Israeli officials, restrictions at the Holy Fire celebration at the Easter Vigil are needed to reduce the fire hazard, but these restrictions were not needed 10 years ago, he said. Daher went on to say that for the last two years, the Jewish Passover and Easter holidays have coincided and that Jews entering the Old City had complete freedom of movement, whereas special permits were required for Palestinians from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem.

About 10,000 permits were issued to Palestinians wishing to worship in Jerusalem in 2016, but they often could not be used because of the unpredictable nature of Israeli restrictions in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Another kind of threat to religious practice has been increasing in both Palestine and Israel. In April 2016, we stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in front of the charred white limestone façade of the Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes (CMLF). Almost a year ago, restoration had just begun on this not-to-be-missed pilgrimage site. An arson attack by young Israeli extremists in June 2015, had caused extensive damage to the roof, entry way, an office, meeting room and souvenir shop. Bibles and prayer books had been burned, and Hebrew words spray painted on the wall in red that denounced the worship of “false gods,” reflected an extremist ideology espousing the belief that “only someone who fights Christianity . . . can call himself a Jew” (*Reuters*, 6.15 and *The Telegraph*, 7.15).

The modern Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes, located near Capernaum in Tabgha, Israel, was built in 1984 on the remains of two earlier Byzantine churches (4th and 5th Century) to commemorate the multiplication of five barley loaves and two fishes in the feeding of the 5,000, one of the earliest miracles performed by Christ. Overseen by the Benedictine order, the fire was first discovered by a caretaker monk who woke to the flames in the middle of the night. He was injured but recovered, and fortunately, the 5th-Century mosaic tiles on the sanctuary floor were spared. The Israeli government reportedly contributed almost \$400,000 toward a restoration project costing some \$1 million (*BBC News*). The church reopened in February 2017.

Unfortunately, the torching of the CMLF was not the first of the hate crimes against Christian and Muslim monuments, cemeteries and places of worship that seem to be growing in frequency and number in both Israel and the West Bank. *The Telegraph* reported that up to the June 18 arson attack, there had been more than 40 incidents in the West Bank and Israel since 2009 with only a “handful of indictments handed down,” and *National Geographic* reported that between the years of 2012 and 2015 alone, a dozen churches and monasteries had been burned, bombed or vandalized. As of writing, three Israelis had been indicted for the torching of the MFLF, but as yet had not been sentenced. (*BBC News*, 2.17).

Population statistics that are both current and reliable are hard to come by because of the shifting demographics now taking place. In his detailed status report *A Place of Roots*

(2014), Dr. Bernard Sabella⁶ states that Palestinian Christians in both Palestine and Israel numbered below 2% of the overall population. Inside the State of Israel, the number of resident Christian citizens stood at about 120,000 or about 1.4% of a total Israeli population of 8.3 million. More recent reports seem to indicate that the number of Christians in Israel is actually growing. According to Dr. Sabella, Israeli Christians comprised about 7.1% of its Arab citizenry, and together, Arab Christians and Muslims numbered about 1.7 million or roughly 20% of Israeli citizens. In Palestine, as of his report, the number of local Arabic speaking Christians stood at about 50,000 or 1.1% of a population of about 4.5 million Palestinians. The Christian population of Jerusalem had fallen from approximately 32,000 in 1945 to about 8,000 today. As of 2015, it was estimated that about 38,000 Christians live in the West Bank, centered primarily in and around Bethlehem (down from about 50,000 less than 10 years ago). The *National Catholic Reporter* (12.16) reported that in 1950, the Christian population of Bethlehem and surrounding villages was about 86% of the total; presently, the number stands at about 11,000 Christians, or 11.7%. Once a predominantly Christian town, Ramallah is now home to 7,000 Christians out of a population of just under 60,000. Figures from 2013 estimate 1,000–1,300 Christians in Gaza (pop. 1.7 million).

In once largely Christian Nazareth, Israel (pop. 75,700), the inhabitants are predominantly Arab citizens among whom about 30% are Christian and 70% Muslim (2015 figures). Nazareth Illit, or upper Nazareth, is the predominantly Jewish sector of Nazareth with a population of about 40,000 in 2014. Developed about sixty years ago on expropriated Arab lands as a planned Jewish community, Nazareth Illit was declared a separate city in 1974. According to *CBS News*, about 21% of the residents are Arab (7% Muslim and 14% Christian). In 2016, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel petitioned the city on behalf of the 2,600 Arab students that live in Nazareth Illit to provide a school that taught classes in Arabic. Arab children are permitted to enroll in Hebrew speaking schools in Nazareth Illit, but most Arab children have no choice but to go to another city to get an education in their own language. The State of Israel has a compulsory education law that gives all children the right to public education, but Israeli schools are segregated into Jewish and Arab sectors. Arab citizens contribute to the tax revenues that support the public schools in Israel, but resources are distributed unevenly.

While the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 resulted in 60,000 Christian refugees, Dr. Sabella states that more than 72% of Palestinian Christians are now found outside their homeland. While both Christians and Muslims are leaving the Holy Land to escape

⁶ Bernard Sabella, PhD is a professor of sociology at Bethlehem University, active in Middle East Council of Churches, and a former member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

increasing hardship and discrimination related to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Christians are seeing the greatest loss in numbers. The ever-increasing rate of emigration by the younger generation, an older Christian population (median age 32), older age of marriage, and lower birthrate compared with the Muslim population contribute to this proportional decline. The fact that so many young Christian women go on to university studies and have successful careers correlates with their later marriage age. When compared with Jewish and Muslim youth in Israel, Christian youth in Israel are more likely to pursue a higher education.

Emigration to the US, Australia and Europe continues, but Palestinian Christians are also emigrating to Central and South America. Now, major Christian diaspora communities are found in Chile and Honduras, Dr. Sabella states. Many of these communities are in their third generation, and roots have been established in the adoptive lands. In addition to living under the Israeli occupation, an additional incentive for emigration is being posed by increasing Israeli and Islamist extremism.

Christians have a history in the Holy Land that goes back to the 1st Century. Palestinian Christians trace their history to the birth of Christ and the early church in the Holy Land. Some families can trace their Christian lineage to the 5th Century, according to Sabella. The wife of the present archdeacon of the Diocese of Jerusalem has said that her family was one of them.

Greek Orthodox and Melkite (Greek Catholic) denominations stem from the Chalcedonian Council in 451 CE which established a patriarchate in Jerusalem. The Latin (or Roman Catholic) church was first established during the crusades when the Franciscan Order assumed custody over the holy places in 1217. The Anglicans joined with the Lutherans in 1841, and the Church of England took over the bishopric in 1886, when the two denominations went their separate ways. Now there are 13 Heads of Churches in the Holy Land.

For many years, Christians have played a significant role in the civil society of Israel and Palestine, especially in the areas of civic leadership, education and healthcare. Dr. Sabella reports that in 2014 there were 65 schools with 25,000 students and 2,500 teachers. Two universities in Bethlehem are run by Christians; the secular Birzeit University near Ramallah was founded by Christians. Bethlehem University was established by Pope Paul VI in 1964. With one exception, my visits to the many schools run by the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem have shown that over half of the students were Muslim. We were told that their parents regarded Christian schools as providing higher quality education than the government schools of either the Palestinian Authority or Israeli government.

In the healthcare sector, Christians head up 30% of the medical services and hospitals, including Caritas Baby Hospital in Bethlehem and the Anglican hospitals, Ahli in Gaza, St. Luke's in Nablus, and Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children in Jerusalem. The Lutheran World Federation runs the Victoria Augusta Hospital on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Sabella notes that there are scores of church-related clinics in Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. With regard to civil society, over 50% of the NGO's and 80% of the human rights organizations in the Palestinian territory are headed by Christians.

Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem, along with the nearby villages of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, remain the major Christian population centers in the West Bank. Currently, Palestinian Christian communities are predominantly urban and middle class, according to Dr. Sabella, although a few smaller towns in agricultural areas, such as Zababdeh and Taybeh, have continued to maintain strong Christian populations. In 2016, we were able to visit both.

Zababdeh, which is in the olive growing hill country in the northeast corner of the West Bank, has large Orthodox, Melkite and Latin communities and a very active Episcopal parish (St. Matthew's) with a large number of youth and young families. We stayed in a guestroom maintained by the church and spent time visiting in the homes of two Christian families with whom we have maintained contact since Janet and Rowieda were guests of the Diocese of Olympia in 2010. Both women and their husbands are working, and their teen-aged children and young families are still at home or married and living nearby. Both are active in the life of their church. Janet had recently been denied permission to visit Jerusalem at Easter because, she believed, she had run for a city office. Rowieda works at the nearby American University and avoids politics. Displaying the outgoing generosity so typical of the Palestinians we have met, both families sent us home loaded with jars of olives picked from their own trees and packed in olive oil. While we were in Zababdeh, electrical power, which has to be purchased from Israel, was cut off from the village for "planned maintenance" on Sunday morning just as people were going to church, so there was no power to ring the electronic bells. Power outages are common, and usually unexpected.

In Taybeh, about eight miles northeast of Jerusalem, Melkite, Orthodox and Latin Catholic churches predominate, but as in Ramallah, different religious traditions worship together on Easter and Christmas. In 2013, when Israeli settlers attempted to take over Taybeh's monastery, youth from Taybeh and surrounding Muslim villages drove out the settlers. Here is located the famous Taybeh brewery, which boosts the local economy by helping farmers in fair trade bottling of olive oil. Maria Khoury, a member of a Christian family, greeted us warmly when our pilgrimage group visited

the brewery — where we enjoyed sampling their many good beer varieties. In a kind of reverse migration, the Khoury family returned to their family home during the optimistic period following the 1995 Oslo Peace Agreement and invested in a microbrewery, having learned to make home brew while living in Boston. Taybeh beer is sold in Israel and now brewed under license in Germany and is popular in Japan, but shipments must go through checkpoints and long delays in the sun to get to market.

Maria Khoury has a doctor's degree in education from Boston University and is the author of Orthodox Christian children's books, including the beautifully Illustrated *Christina Goes to the Holy Land*,⁷ which walks a child in the footsteps of Christ, and *Witness in the Holy Land*, which describes her experiences living under military occupation with her husband, the former Mayor of Taybeh, and their three children. Her articles have been published world-wide in numerous newspapers and magazines and have been translated into various languages, helping to bring awareness of the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Sharing a common language and culture, indigenous Christians have lived peacefully with Palestinian Muslims for centuries and have played a role in helping to maintain positive relationships with Jews. Until 1948, many considered themselves *Blood Brothers*.⁸ There was general agreement among those with whom we spoke on our 2016 pilgrimage that the Christian exodus was the result of continued loss of human rights and economic opportunities, not the result of conflict between Christians and Muslims. In the *Christian Post* (7/14) the Rev. Alex Awad, professor at Bethlehem Bible College, challenged the notion that the Muslims were causing Christians to leave. "In Palestine, Muslims and Christians have been hand-in-hand" resisting the Israeli occupation, he said; we "share the same feelings and suffering" related to the difficulties of living in Palestine, not overt discrimination toward Christians. "As Muslims suffer, so do we Christians," a Catholic shop owner on Bethlehem's manger square told me. Muslims are leaving too, but their population decline is less dramatic because of the proportional difference in their numbers compared with the Christians, who also are more connected with the Western churches.

Quoting one Palestinian who said, "We are children of the land which nourished this civilization . . . we are Arabs as much as any resident in the Arab land is Arab," Dr. Sabella states that a "significant minority" of Christians see their Christian identity as a defining characteristic. For the most part, religious identity is secondary to their Arab

⁷ *Christina Goes to the Holy Land* is distributed through www.HolyCrossBookstore.com

⁸ *Blood Brothers-expanded Edition*; by Elias Chacour and David Hazard; Chosen books, 2003

Palestinian identity. In this sense, an Arab identity is the tie that connects the disparate parts of Palestinian society.

However, there are some signs that these ties are beginning to fray. In *Muslim-Christian Relations: Historical and Contemporary Relations*,⁹ Jane Smith of Harvard Divinity School states that Christian-Muslim relations in the broader Middle East are at the lowest point since the Crusades. She writes that Christian concerns about the recent rise of political Islam and implications for a future Palestinian state based on religious precepts. Christians in Muslim dominated areas generally favor separation of religion and state, while some Muslim factions argue that the two cannot be separated. Christians seek a state founded on individual freedom and equality, but the trend in recent times in the Middle East has been toward theocracy, not democracy. High on the list of concerns for all Palestinians is the rapid expansion of Jewish settlements and the current talk in Israel of becoming a Jewish state.

Additional strains on Muslim-Christian relations are coming in the form of right-wing evangelical support of Israel as the land promised to the Jews and the “well-funded *Islamophobia* industry in the United States that has been producing and distributing large amounts of anti-Muslim material” at an estimated cost of more than 40 million dollars each year, says Smith.

Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, assistant editor for foreign policy at the *Washington Post* (12.23.16) writes that the existence of Palestinian Christians and the difficulties they face under Israeli occupation “is a blind spot” for many American Christians. While hearts and minds turn toward Bethlehem at Christmas, many do not ponder who lives there now, or under what conditions. In recent years, a number of mainstream denominations have been advocating for their Palestinian brothers and sisters, but more fundamental evangelical Christians believe that support for Israel is an inherent Christian duty. Allen-Ebrahimian cites a 2013 *Pew Research* survey that found that more than 80% of evangelical Christians believe that God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people, although only about 40% of American Jews agree. She also states that the degree that many of these Christians are conservative Republicans correlates with an American foreign policy that places a premium on Israeli security because of the belief that Islamic terrorism is the basic cause of the problems for Israelis and Palestinians.

Palestinian Christians tell us that the unconditional support for Israel from American so-called “Christian Zionists” complicates their relationship with their Muslim

⁹ Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion; “Muslim-Christian Relations: Historical and Contemporary Realities” by Jane Smith; April, 2015.

neighbors by creating distance, dissonance, even distrust. Dr. Sabella points out that with “the increased politicization of religion in the region and beyond, Christians [have] tended to react by withdrawing inward, thus heightening their religious identity . . . a yearning for one Arab homeland has been replaced by a religious identity which tends to exclude others not of the same religion and hence increase the feeling of marginalization among Arab Christians.”

We saw signs of fatigue and resignation during the time we spent in Ramallah, where disappointment with the failure of the Palestinian Authority to bring about a Palestinian state — or at least an improvement in their daily lives — was often expressed. People seemed to feel isolation and despair, almost to the point of losing hope. We also sensed the erosion of generational cohesion and unravelling of traditional culture and mores. In our short time with 9th- and 11th-graders, we witnessed disrespect for the teacher and heard cynical views of the future. The occupation leads to a dead end.

Samir Qumsieh, the owner of *Nativity TV*, the only Christian TV station in Palestine and a researcher focusing on Christian issues said, “I hope it won’t come to be that the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher will become museums, but the fact on the ground is dark and gloomy.” His own family is an example. One of six highly-educated brothers, four of whom are engineers, Qumsieh is the only one still living in Palestine. His two sons, studying in the US, laughed when asked if they were coming back to Bethlehem after graduating. The two sons of our own tour leader were also students in the US. It was not clear where they would live after completing their education, but there was hope for their return.

Very occasionally, the Israeli High Court has ruled in favor of the Palestinians. In 2012, Israel resumed construction of the wall in the Cremisan valley, one of the last green areas in the Bethlehem district with large stretches of agricultural land. Designed to separate the neighboring city of Beit Jala from the settlement of Har Gilo, Israel claimed the purpose was to stop terrorists, but it was clear that this route allowed for the effective annexation of more Palestinian land. According to B’tselem, a major Israeli human rights group, 85% of the route fell inside the West Bank instead of following the Green Line, the recognized boundary between Israel and Palestine. The planned route was to run through the valley on land owned by 58 Christian families, separating a monastery and winery, its sister convent, and the school children from their school. After a nine-year court battle between the families and the state of Israel, the Vatican and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops were instrumental in obtaining a ruling in favor of keeping the monastery and convent connected on the Palestinian side of the barrier, thus illustrating the importance of international intervention in the name of justice.

What do Palestinians think about the future? A 2016 survey by Pew Research Center of native-born Arab Christian and Jewish residents of the West Bank and East Jerusalem showed that nearly three quarters of the Christians believed that Israel cannot be both a democracy and a Jewish state. Israeli Christians opposed the settlements that the Jewish state is building in the West Bank, and 79% believe that the continued settlement program hurts the security of Israel. Almost 9 in 10 Christians expressed a strong Christian identity, and more than half said their faith was very important to them, but most were pessimistic about the possibility of a viable two-state resolution or reversing the tide of Christian emigration.

“It is difficult to imagine a time in history at which there is greater need for serious interfaith engagement than now,” says Jane Smith. “The future is guaranteed by reaffirming the best in our Palestinian past and present, celebrating our humanity and overcoming the prejudices that come with narrow identities that lead to violence and the exclusion of others,” says Dr. Sabella. He concludes his report with an affirmation by Latin Patriarch Michel Sabah who believes that there is “no option but to stay on the land.”

While they may be shrinking in number, it is clear that Palestinians who plan to remain in their homeland cling to the belief that in God’s time justice and peace will come to the Holy Land, and their ancient traditions of worship and still vibrant churches and mosques offer testimony to deep and continuous roots in the land. There is a moral imperative for us to find ways to help them stay.

PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE TO STAY ON THEIR LAND

A brief history of 50 years of Israeli occupation

A visitor to the West Bank needs little time “on the ground” to observe the damaging effects of the 50 years of Israeli military occupation on the lives of the Palestinian people. Nowhere have these “facts” been more dramatic than in the towns and rural villages near Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron and Nablus. During our stay in the spring of 2016, we saw a proliferation of new red-tiled roofs on the hills around Ramallah, and nearly every hilltop encircling the city now had trailers denoting yet another new settler “outpost.” In February 2017, Israel approved the retroactive legalization of scores of illegal Jewish outposts built on privately owned Palestinian land (*The Guardian*, 2.17). This law stipulates that the original landowner should be compensated either with money or alternative land — *even if they do not agree to give up their property*.

Over half of some hundred outposts are home to ultra-orthodox Jewish settlers who believe that the land is and has always been theirs since God gave the land of Palestine to the Israelites, and they are becoming increasingly hostile to their Palestinian neighbors, committing violent acts that are creating a strong incentive for Palestinian families to consider leaving for fear of their lives. Attacks by settlers take the form of destruction of olive groves, orchards, and vineyards, threats or physical attacks on Palestinian harvesters, damage to homes and vehicles, and hate graffiti and arson on Christian and Muslim places of worship (*Americans for Peace Now*, 7.17).

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism is on the rise in Israel-Palestine. September 27, 2017 marked the third incidence of wanton violence, when stained glass and religious artifacts at St. Stephen’s church in the Beit Jamal Monastery not far from Jerusalem were damaged; this monastery previously had been firebombed and gravestones defaced. Between 2013 and 2016, “death to Christians,” “Christians go to hell,” and other graffiti had appeared on the walls of the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem. In October 2017, *Ha’aretz* reported a total of 53 churches and mosques have been vandalized in Israel since 2009, but only nine indictments had been filed.

Whereas most American Jews believe in separation of church and state, Israel is becoming a theocracy as the notion of a *Jewish state* gains ascendancy. In Israel, reform and conservative rabbis cannot perform weddings or funerals and conversion is not

recognized (Allan Brownfeld,¹⁰ 7.17). In *The Forward*, the editor stated that “Netanyahu has turned his back on pluralist Jews,” and he also points out the fact that more liberal Jews in the diaspora are seen as outsiders. In America, some influential rabbis are asking why more American Jews are not expressing moral outrage at the implication of a Jewish state on the civil rights of non-Jews in Israel and Palestine, as it becomes clear to many that the leadership in Israel is moving away from the moral and ethical traditions of Judaism. Radical interpretation of Jewish sacred writings bolster and justify the more oppressive and discriminatory practices in Israel. Said Israel Shahak, a Holocaust survivor, scholar and civil rights advocate, Jewish extremists are “not basing their religion on the ethics of justice” (*If Americans Knew*, 4.17).

The collapse of the Israeli/Palestinian peace process and the present chaos in the Arab world has widely accelerated the settler movement in the last two years. Early in 2017 came the announcement that Israel would build nearly 6,000 new housing units on private land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which is in the West Bank. In fact, in February Israel also announced plans for a brand new West Bank settlement, the first in 20 years (Reuters 2.17). Israeli settlers, apparently sensing a new opportunity, are now considering whether to “separate or annex” — in effect, envisioning instead of a two-state solution, a final and single Jewish state outcome. Recent talk of the formal annexation of Ma’ale Adumim, a West Bank settlement of nearly 40,000 Jewish citizens located about 5 minutes east of Jerusalem, may bring this question to a head sooner than later.

In August 2017, *The Independent* quoted Prime Minister Netanyahu as saying, “We will deepen our roots, strengthen, build and settle.” At the time encouraged by the election of President Donald Trump and his apparent willingness to support a one-state configuration, the Israeli government had recently announced plans for more than 11,000 new settler homes in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* (6.17) reported a 70% rise in building starts in existing West Bank settlements between 2016 and 2017, and according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, by June, Israel had advanced its highest number of settlement projects since 1992 (*Aljazeera*, 6.17).

Population statistics vary widely from year to year, even month to month. Overall population figures from the *CLA World Fact Book* (2016) report 2.6 million Palestinians in the West Bank and 1.7 million in Gaza, with 6.2 million Jews and 1.6 million Arabs in Israel, not including the Druze, an Arabic speaking religious minority numbering

¹⁰ Brownfeld is a syndicated columnist, an editor for the American Council for Judaism, and a contributing editor for the Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs.

about 130,000 who are citizens of Israel and serve in the Israeli Defense Force. The YESHA Council, an organization representing settlers, claims that there are 420,000 Israeli settlers now living in the West Bank. The “Saturday Essay” of the *Wall Street Journal* (2.17) reported an estimated 430,000 settlers living in 131 officially sanctioned settlements spread throughout the West Bank, not including East Jerusalem.

In East Jerusalem, until last year, there seemed to be consensus that there were approximately 200,000 settlers, along with roughly 300,000 Palestinians. However, *Ha'aretz* (5.17) stated that the number of Palestinians living in Jerusalem is underestimated by up to 100,000 because the Wall splits off two large Palestinian neighborhoods from the municipal boundaries declared by Israel to be “outside” the city limits. Since settlers enjoy full rights and privileges of citizenship regardless of where they are living, it appears that nearly 600,000 Israeli citizens are presently living alongside some about 2.7 million non-citizen Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In addition to natural growth, factors that make accurate population estimates more challenging are the de facto changes in borders and population shifts brought about by the present construction of about 275 lineal miles of the separation Wall begun in 2002. The so-called “Green Line,” first established in 1949 between Israel and Palestine at the armistice ending the Arab-Israeli War, has been recognized by the international community as the boundary between Israel and Palestine and has been the basis of peace negotiations between the two sides since Israel took military control of the West Bank after the Six-Day War of 1967. Although it clearly prescribes life on both sides of the line, Israel does not accept the Green Line as a permanent border, and even the geographical designation of the “West Bank” is disappearing from maps and textbooks printed in Israel. Traditional Arab place names for towns and villages in Israel and the West Bank have been “Hebraized,” and trying to follow an old map is not easy.

Settlement expansion has encroached well inside the Green Line into the West Bank, which the Palestinians hoped would become the basis for a state of their own, but current figures from the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs indicate that only about 60% of the projected 444 miles of the Wall has been completed, and that about 85% of the Wall now falls on the Palestinian side of the Green Line. In fact, the Israeli settlement watchdog NGO, *Peace Now*, said the settlement boom coincided with a 2.5 percent drop in housing starts *inside* Israel. In a comprehensive report, *Ha'aretz* (6.17) indicates that nearly 40% of the settlers live *outside* the settlement blocs, a fact that may make it almost impossible to divide the West Bank into two separate states. It is interesting to note that Israeli government

officials and citizens say the “new housing projects will not hinder Israel’s ability to resolve the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (*Jewish News Source*, 1.17).

Writing in the “Saturday Essay” (*Wall Street Journal*, 1.17) Yossi Klein Halevi, senior fellow of the Shalom Harman Institute in Jerusalem, stated that the election of President Trump has been accompanied by a “moment of high expectancy,” where mainstream Israelis now take it for granted that Israel should take over the West Bank as a legitimate claim related to their deep historical roots. Absorbing more than 2.5 million Palestinians into Israel would threaten the identity of Israel as a Jewish state, said Halevi. If rights of citizenship were to be granted to the Palestinians, Israel would be forced to choose between becoming a democratic or an apartheid Jewish state — a “moral and political dilemma.” While polls in the past have shown that Israelis supported a two-state solution and backed peace talks, now only a quarter think that talks will succeed.

To an impartial observer, there can be little doubt that the single most significant impediment to peace between Israel and Palestine has been the construction of Israeli settlements, a long-term enterprise which began within a year of the 1967 war. In addition to the illegal acquisition and use of Palestinian land, the settlements have created a whole host of related problems for the Palestinians, including limits on water, urban development, housing and agricultural production, restrictions on travel and trade, access to employment, education, and places of worship, and the imposition of military, rather than civil law on Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The international community deems the settlements to be illegal — a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits the transfer of an occupying power’s civilian population into the occupied territory. Israel disputes this claim by arguing that the Palestinian lands had not been legally held by a sovereign power prior to Israel’s occupation of them. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has issued a series of resolutions challenging the legality of the settlements and declaring them to be a serious obstruction to a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, including the landmark UNSC Resolution 242 of November 1967, which addressed the “right of the Palestinian people to self-determination” and was adopted as a provision of the United Nations Charter. Most recently, in December 2016, the UNSC reaffirmed that settlements have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of international law. Fourteen member states voted in favor, but the US abstained.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict over land ownership has its roots in the rise of the Zionist nationalist movement of the latter part of the 19th Century and the decision by

the United Nations in 1947 to partition historic Palestine. From the late 19th Century, a growing Zionist movement had as its goal the creation of a Jewish national state in historic Palestine and was encouraging Jews to emigrate from Europe and the Middle East to their historic homeland. Jewish communities had begun to purchase land from the Ottomans, who controlled much of the Middle East for 400 years, and while the movement was largely secular, there were religious undertones associated with some of the British and Jewish proponents who believed that this land had been promised by God to the Israelite Jews.

After the defeat of the Ottoman empire in World War I — the Ottoman Turks had fought on the side of Germany — Palestine fell under British administrative and military control in 1917 and would be administered under the British Mandate of Palestine, which extended from the Mediterranean on the West to the Jordan River on the East, and from Lebanon on the North to the Red Sea on the South.

In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour issued his “Balfour Declaration,” which essentially stated that the British government looked favorably on the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, but that nothing should be done which would “prejudice the civil and religious rights” of the existing non-Jewish population. Very recently (October 2017) there was a move in Great Britain on the part of judges and clergy to acknowledge responsibility for the unjust legacy of the Balfour doctrine and address the neglected moral and legal mandates of defending Palestinian rights (*Balfour Project*).

Throughout the 1920’s there was a rapid increase of emigration from Europe and concurrent resistance from indigenous Palestinians over Jewish acquisition and use of Palestinian land. Christians had been a presence in Palestine since the 1st Century and Muslims since the 7th. Especially onerous were Jewish policies and practices that prohibited the employment of Arabs in Jewish industries and farms as well as the perception that British policies favored the Jews in dispute resolution. Riots and armed confrontations ensued that persisted for over a decade and resulted in the loss of many lives.

By 1931, 17 percent of the Mandate were Jews, and immigration peaked during the rise of Nazi power in Europe, almost doubling the Jewish population in Palestine. In an effort to quell a major Arab revolt (1936–39) Britain reduced the number of emigrants allowed permanent entry, and this policy remained in place during the Mandate, which coincided with the Nazi Holocaust and the flight of Jewish refugees from Europe. At the end of the World War II, armed conflicts immediately resumed, and Britain was eager to withdraw from costly diplomatic and peace-keeping efforts, ceding these

responsibilities to the United Nations. At that time, only about 7% of the land was under Jewish ownership, and resident Jews represented only about 33% of the population.

In 1947, in a desire to keep the peace and provide a safe homeland for Jewish refugees and immigrants, the UN developed a partition plan that distributed 57% of Palestine to the Jews and 43% to the Palestinians. Israel would receive three fertile plains and two-thirds of the Mediterranean coastline, along with the Negev desert and sole access to the Red Sea. Palestine was to receive the highlands of the West Bank and the Jordan valley and one-third of the coastline, namely the Gaza strip. At the epicenter of the three Abrahamic religions, Jerusalem was to become an international city administered by the UN.

Because the proposed allocations strongly favored the Israelis, even though they clearly had the least land ownership and population, the Palestinians and their Arab neighbors were understandably opposed to this plan and in May 1948, when the Mandate expired and Israel announced the formation of an independent State of Israel, war broke out between the two sides. By the time an armistice was agreed in 1949, Israel, with a much stronger and cohesive military force had prevailed over the Palestinians and their Arab allies. Almost overnight, Palestinians found themselves becoming refugees in their own land, as nearly 750,000 of them were driven from their homes, many at gunpoint, and forced to find safety in other parts of Israel or another country, never to return to their homes. Entire villages were bulldozed, as homes, businesses, and orchards were either destroyed or forcibly acquired by new Jewish occupants. Ilan Pappe, an Israeli historian and academic now living in England to preserve his academic freedom, forthrightly refers this forced migration as “ethnic cleansing” in his seminal work *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (One World Oxford, 2006). The Palestinian people refer to it as *al nakba*, or “the catastrophe.”

We are personally acquainted with Palestinians whose families were forced to leave their homes and businesses in 1948, taking nothing but the clothes on their backs. One Muslim family of twelve from Jaffa was forced to flee to Gaza — the father owned and lost his profitable farm supply store. The youngest daughter eventually obtained a scholarship for study in the US and lived in our home for almost two years while she finished a Master’s program in public administration. She returned to Gaza to help her people and now heads an after-school arts program to teach children non-violent ways to express their frustration and anger. Another family of twelve, Christians from the town of Beisan (renamed Beit She’an), were forcibly evicted with no time to gather their belongings or papers and had to flee, eventually finding refuge in Nazareth. The father lost his successful jewelry business, and the Israelis moved three Jewish families

into the family's three fully furnished homes and gardens. Their valuables were stolen, and important papers, such as deeds and birth certificates, were burned. One of the sons eventually became a theologian and influential author and peacemaker.

By the time of the armistice, Israel had conquered and incorporated nearly 50% more territory, moving the balance of land distribution to 78% for Israel and 22% for Palestine — inclusive of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza strip. Jordan and Egypt were granted custodianship over the West Bank and Gaza, respectively. Unrest continued, and in 1967, at the close of the Six Day War, Israel took full military control of all Palestinian lands, including East Jerusalem. The complete military occupation of Palestine had begun.

Efforts to address the illegal occupation and establish Palestinian rights have waxed and waned, with the most hopeful prospects immediately following the Oslo Accords, signed by Yasser Arafat for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in 1993. The Oslo accords were supposed to mark the beginning of negotiations toward a permanent peace treaty between Israel and Palestine. The basis of the final status agreement was the UNSC Resolution 242 condemning the occupation of territory acquired by war and calling for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from those territories occupied during the 1967 war, namely the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights (part of Syria). This resolution has been the cornerstone, and sticking point, in the Israeli/Palestinian dispute since 1967 and the basis for efforts to define borders and territorial integrity for the Palestinians.

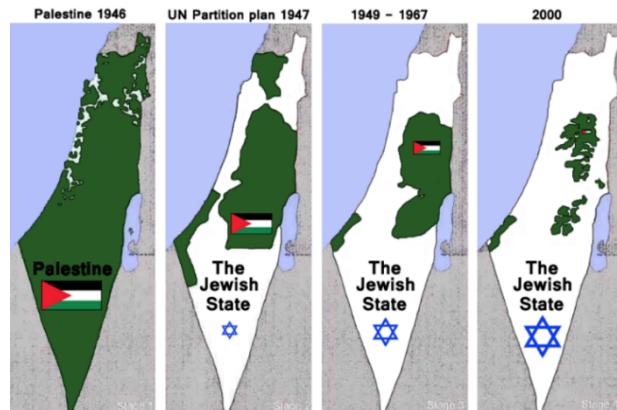
The Oslo "process" was expected to address the most important issues to be determined: borders, settlements, the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian right of return, and a negotiated balance between Israeli military control and Palestinian autonomy, (denoting areas "A" under full Palestinian civil and security authority); "B" under Palestinian civil control and Israeli security; and "C" under full Israeli military and administrative control.) These areas do not have mutually agreed territorial borders.

The Oslo accords did not create a Palestinian state, and left for future negotiation were the Israeli military withdrawal and transfer of responsibility to the Palestinians. Even then, by excluding the settlements and Jerusalem from the agreement, Israel would maintain full military control over all borders and airspace, as well as the territorial waters of Gaza. By the time the Oslo negotiations began, in addition to land and border control, Israel had already gained control over the largest share of the water resources

of the West Bank, according to a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service (1.16).

Following the signing of the Oslo agreement, there was a brief period of Palestinian optimism that Israel would eventually turn over control of the West Bank to Palestinian self-rule, but by any standard, the Oslo agreement has failed miserably in fulfilling the right of Palestinians to self-determination and a secure and peaceful existence for either Israel or Palestine. Under Oslo, Israeli has consolidated vast territorial gains, and now has military control of about half of the West Bank. In 1967, Israel expanded Jerusalem's municipal boundaries to include newly settled territory, an act of annexation never recognized by the international community. Now, about 62% of the West Bank is now under full Israeli military and civil control, but even within Area A, Israeli can and does conduct military raids at any time. This means that since 1948, the 22% of historic Palestine that was left for a Palestinian state has shrunk to less than 10%, and this remainder is now chopped up by numerous bypass roads and military security perimeters and checkpoints constructed to protect the settlements.

In the 24 years since the Oslo accords were negotiated, settlement construction has continued unabated. In addition to loss of land, a burgeoning combination of restrictive laws regarding water rights, land use and the expanding "facts on the ground" have disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian families and are the most significant cause for the Palestinian exodus and the emigration of the younger generation. Nine visits over 20 years undeniably show the exponential effects of the occupation, most notably over the last three years.



WHY PALESTINIANS ARE LEAVING

The “Facts on the Ground”

A comprehensive report published in December 2016, by B’tselem (*Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories*) lays out the various ways and means that Israel has continued to appropriate and transfer Palestinian lands to Jewish settlers. Established in 1987 by prominent Israeli academics, lawyers and journalists to educate the Israeli public and members of parliament about human right violations in the occupied territories, this organization conducts in-depth research and publishes well documented reports about the “devastating repercussions [of] the fragmentation of Palestinian space into isolated enclaves, cutting communities off from essential land resources that are vital to their development.” The report concludes that “the forced separation of the Palestinian villages from their farmlands, pastureland and natural water resources [has] severely infringed upon their rights, devastated the local economy and propelled them into poverty and dependence on external bodies” at many levels of insecurity — social, economic, food and water. An encyclopedia of human and civil rights abuses must include an expanding array of restrictions on land use, water access, freedom of movement of people and goods, educational and economic development, and civil and political rights that have been imposed upon the Palestinian population.

For hundreds of years, Palestinian villages have been largely self-sufficient, depending on sustainable dry-land farms and orchards, livestock and shepherding for a living. Conservation of rainwater that has seeped into the limestone and the use of cisterns to collect surface runoff have provided a sufficient water supply. Most of the produce was consumed by the people themselves, but road access to larger towns and cities allowed them to reach bigger markets for agricultural surplus and the products of small business.

Measures that Israel typically uses to appropriate Palestinian land include:

- Declaring agricultural land to be “state land,”
- Creation of “nature reserves” or open space,
- Creation of physical obstacles to Palestinian access to their own land,
- Declaring land as “Special Security Areas” for the protection of settlements (including military buffer zones and other infrastructure),
- Creation of by-pass roads to connect settlements but that prohibits use by Palestinians (even crossing by foot) and creates controlled borders between villages and villagers from their land.

Destruction of Palestinian homes and other property

In 2016, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICHAD) reported that nearly 48,000 Palestinian properties, homes and other structures, in the West Bank had been seized or demolished since 1967, and nearly 300,000 Palestinians have left the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the last 10 years — most of the emigres are young, middle class, well-educated, and Christian. Area C is now 62% of the West Bank land but has only 5% of the Palestinian population. ICHAD states that it is the official policy of Israel to maintain a 72/28% population majority.

The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the occupied territory reported in February 2017, that the number of structures leveled in the first month of the year had exceeded the monthly average for 2016 and displaced 240 Palestinians, affecting another 4,000. These demolitions were concentrated in area C around Nablus, Hebron, East Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley. B'tselem (2.17) reported that the number of demolitions in 2016 had broken the record of 2015 and 2014 combined. Last year 362 residences were destroyed and more than 1,100 Palestinians were made homeless, about half of them minors.

Once declared to be “state land” by the government of Israel, the burden of proof of ownership falls on the Palestinian owner. Old or new Palestinian construction on land claimed by Israel is deemed “illegal” and is subject to demolition orders, usually on grounds that building permits have not been obtained, but more than 95 percent of Palestinian building applications, even to remodel or repair existing structures, are rejected. More and more, the owners of “illegal” property are required to destroy it themselves or pay the fee for Israel to do it for them. Demolishing homes as a collective act of retribution for protest is not uncommon. B’tselem states that the principle reason is to limit Palestinian presence in the areas that Israel intends to take over.

Restrictions on freedom of movement

Israel can restrict movement in or out at all points of entry into the West Bank and Gaza at any time. Currently there are over 100 permanent obstacles to travel in or out of the West Bank. On October 11, 2017, all checkpoints were closed for a period of 11 days for the celebration of the Jewish religious Sukkot (Feast of the Tabernacles). This closure would disrupt the lives of some 4.5 million Palestinians, and according to the *Jerusalem Post* and *Ha'aretz* (10.17) affect tens of thousands of West Bank workers who have permits to work in Israel or Israeli settlements on the West Bank. The order was later amended to permit selective admission of those who work in agriculture or hospitals in accordance with the “needs of the market.”

B'Tselem called the extended Sukkot closure the “collective punishment of tens of thousands of Palestinians” and the “exploitation of the military power and authority as wanton abuse of civilians without accountability.” (*Jerusalem Post*) Such closures are typical at the end of all Jewish holidays — Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Passover — but can be imposed for the duration and can deny access to health or educational facilities. The reason given for such closures is usually because the holiday comes after an incident which calls for greater security.

Bypass roads which connect the settlements with each other and with commercial centers are generally off-limits to Palestinians, who must use secondary roads to reach their jobs, agricultural lands, essential services and other Palestinian communities. Bethlehem is now nearly surrounded by three large settlement blocs that are connected through by-pass roads and served by an urban infrastructure of services.

Because of restrictions on trade and economic development in the West Bank, Palestinian workers, predominantly trades and service sector workers, must seek



employment in the settlements to feed their families. In addition to loss of employment income, Palestinians are often unable to visit families or places of worship. Israeli citizens who wish to visit holy sites in the West Bank are generally not allowed to do so without a special permit. Not too long ago, I rode with a priest who had such a permit to visit Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusalem. His mother and the

mother of his fiancée planned to ride along to visit the Church of the Nativity. We were stopped at the checkpoint and refused entry because the women, who lived near Nazareth, were Israeli citizens — no other reasons given. Sadly, now there are few opportunities for Palestinians and Israelis to get to know each other in an increasingly segregated society.

Restrictions on water access and use

In the West Bank, more than 80 percent of available water is allocated for settlement use, and Palestinians, who are not allowed to dig new wells, must buy their water from Israel. In addition to water restrictions, there are restrictions on electric power. Although some have developed solar systems, 203 Palestinian villages are not connected to the power grid.

In 1967, Mekorot, Israel's national water company, took control of the mountain aquifer of the West Bank and now has control of 80% of the water. Under the occupation, many Palestinian wells and irrigation systems have been destroyed, and no new wells are allowed. Palestinian municipalities must purchase the water from Mekorot, which has the power to reduce or shut off supply at any time. According to the EU report (1.16) the distribution between settlements and Palestinian communities is not equitable, with settlements allotted about 3 times as much water. Palestinians receive below 100 liters per day set as a minimum human consumption standard by the World Health Organization. About 200,000 Palestinians live where there are no connections to the water network and must either purchase bottled water or get their water from tanker trucks, paying four times as much as if they could purchase water from Mekorot. The heatwave of the summer of 2016 had begun before we left Ramallah. Later in the season, drastic reductions in water supplies in parts of the West Bank led to the death of livestock and ruined gardens and nurseries.

Restrictions on economic development and trade

Many Palestinians now work for the Israelis — most often in construction. About 60,000 of an estimated 100,000 have work permits that allow them to work in the settlements or over the Green Line. Most of those who do not have permits work in menial, low-paid jobs and take the risk of working illegally because unemployment is now so high in Palestine. As such, these workers have little control over their working conditions or compensation.

The productive sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing and tourism are on “artificial respiration” according to *Ha’aretz* (Nov. 2016). Agricultural and industrial output was now only about 15% of the economy. Because of Israeli restrictions on development, control of land and water resources as well as transportation and trade, regulation of the import and export of materials and goods, Israel has significantly impacted the sustainability of the Palestinian economy. Amira Haas writing in *Ha’aretz* in 2013 on restrictions that weaken competitiveness of Palestinian business vis-a-vis Israeli farmers, manufacturers and hi-tech companies quoted an outgoing World Bank director saying that “. . . unleashing the potential from ‘withheld land’ — access to which constrained by layers of restrictions and allowing the Palestinians to put these resources to work would provide whole new areas of economic activity and set the economy on the path to sustainable growth.”

While we were there in 2016, Ramallah was experiencing a rapid population growth because of the limited development and economic opportunities in the smaller nearby villages. As a result, there were fewer jobs and a downward shift in wages, and we were

told that there was an unemployment rate approaching 50%. Unable to make a living, many small land owners were forced to sell their land to developers, and Ramallah was in the midst of a real estate boom that was driving housing prices too high for many families to afford. More and more people were trying to start small businesses or becoming “traders,” but few were making much of a living. Rapid buying and selling of real estate had created inflated prices, and we heard that many builders and buyers were in debt over their heads. We could see that many of the new apartment buildings were empty concrete shells — one estimate was that there were about 40,000 empty units, many of them owned by the bank. Contributing to the inflationary spiral are foreign residents and wealthy Palestinian expats who buy land for speculation and are building lavish mansions on the property. Many of these homes are maintained by caretakers, while the owner comes back for visits and vacations.

During our short time with the high school students at the Arab Evangelical Episcopal School in Ramallah (AEES) we heard many expressions of frustration with the failure of the Palestinian Authority and the international community (especially the US) to bring about the end of the occupation. At AEES, some of the young people with whom we spoke seemed to reject the traditional value of respect for education and were turning away from education as the answer. Several asked why go on to college when there are so few employment opportunities for highly educated Palestinians in their homeland? With a bit of cynicism, some asked why not just live for the day and make merry while they can?

Still, there was a feeling of hope at Evangelical Technological and Vocational Training Center in Ramallah (ETVTC). This program, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, offers, alongside a traditional high school course of study, a specialized two-track program that includes vocational training and internships that prepare their graduates for work in information technology and hospitality industries. To date, this school has been successful in placing many of their graduates in commercial enterprises in the West Bank.

To help stem the sale of Palestinian land, our friend Ahmad, whom we first met when he was a graduate student in urban planning and sustainable development at the University of Washington, has developed a model demonstration farm on his family’s land in a village near Ramallah. Now a professor at Birzeit University, Ahmad is teaching his students how to create a sustainable living from organic farming. He believes that this is one way to enable Palestinians to resist the pressure to sell their land and permit them to stay on their land. By conserving and recycling water, enriching the soil by integrated crop-livestock management and raising food crops and animals that are ecologically appropriate to the environment, the farmer can at the same time

create products that can be sold commercially, such as honey, and become largely self-sufficient and independent. Ahmad has created a virtual land of milk and honey on his rocky desert hillside.

During our stay in the West Bank in the spring of 2016, we were invited to see Rawabi, a new residential development under construction near Ramallah and billed as a “Palestinian settlement.” Riding the crest of the real estate boom, the wealthy developer, Bashar Masri, who became wealthy as a builder in other parts of the Middle East and is an American citizen educated in the US, is creating a modern self-contained “city” designed to accommodate nearly 40,000 Ramallah ex-urbanite hi-tech workers and mid-career professionals. The city, about half completed (*Washington Post*, 5.17) is being two-thirds financed by Qatari backers and has been a major employer in the region. The land was purchased from thousands of owners, using right of “eminent domain” for some of the properties with the help of the PA. This has created some resentment among local residents, who question the loyalties of the developer. Because access is through Area C, Masri needed permission from Israel to proceed, and it took four years to build a road, a single two-lane highway which can be closed off at any time. As the many settlements in the area are drawing down the aquifer, there is an acute shortage of water. Israel has balked at supplying the development with water, and as negotiations proceed, many potential buyers have cancelled their orders.

Restrictions on Palestinian civil rights and military justice

According to Human Rights Watch, Palestinians face systematic discrimination because of race, ethnicity and national origin. Amnesty International agrees (*Middle East Monitor*, 2016). The vast majority of Palestinians in Jerusalem are considered permanent residents, but not citizens of Israel. They may vote in municipal elections, but not in national elections, so they have no political representation in the Knesset. Palestinians living in the West Bank cannot vote in national elections; settlers in the West Bank have full rights of Israeli citizenship, as well as a vote in national elections. The nature of the many civil and human rights abuse in the occupied territories is beyond the scope of this report. For detail, go to the Country Report on Human Rights practices issued by the US State Department in March 2017.¹¹

Israel has a dual legal system in the occupied territories — civil for the 600,000 settlers and military courts for the 4.5 million Palestinians, with a 99.74% conviction rate. Israeli military courts can arrest and detain under “administration detention” for up to six months without charge, renewable indefinitely for six month periods. Throwing

¹¹ <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2016/nea/265502.htm>.

rocks by children can lead to imprisonment. Under this arrangement, legal representation can be denied. One of the more notorious detention centers, Ofer Prison, near Ramallah, was the site of the death in 2015 of a young Palestinian¹² demonstrator from the Episcopal Technological and Vocational Training Center in Ramallah. Young people who demonstrate at this prison, often because of the detention of children as young as 12 years, are at risk of being arrested or shot. In our conversation with students at the AEES high school, a third-year student described his near miss with a live bullet, and we learned that the husband of a teacher from the same school had been behind bars for many months without charge. Over the years, many young Palestinian demonstrators have lost their lives, but until the recent cold-blooded killing of a Palestinian protester near Hebron, very few Israeli soldiers have been charged or brought to justice.

As reported in “No Way to Treat a Child” in April 2016,¹³ Israel has the distinction of being the only country in the world that each year detains and prosecutes in military courts between 500 and 700 children, some as young as 12 years, most often for throwing stones. In February 2016, 440 children were in the military system, a quarter of them between 12 and 15 years. The Israel Prison System stopped releasing data after May 2016.

In May 2017, according to the AFSC, there was an increase in the number of Palestinian children confined for an average of 16 days, some in solitary confinement. In addition to isolation, the use of abuse and threats has been documented, and more than 90% of the children held in solitary confinement provided a confession. The use of isolation to create a psychological willingness to “confess” is in violation of international law. In the vast majority of cases (97%) the children had no legal representation or parent present before interrogation. Some children plead guilty as the fastest way to get out of prison, and most receive plea deals of less than 12 months. Israel transfers over half of the child detainees from Palestine to prisons inside Israel, again in violation of international law. In February 2017, DCIP and AFSC delivered 11,000 signatures standing against ill treatment of Palestinian children to the US Department of State.

Where do we go from here?

The dollar cost of supporting injustice and oppression in the occupation of the residents of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza is in the billions. In “The True

¹² This student, we learned recently, was a cousin of a Seattle area resident who is active in Palestinian advocacy work.

¹³ A joint project of the Defense for Children International – Palestine (DCIP) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC).

Cost of Israel,” Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer who is executive director of the Council for the National Interest wrote in April 2017, that according to the Congressional Research Service, Israel has been “the largest recipient of US foreign assistance since World War II.” The US has given Israel financial aid averaging about 3.6 billion dollars per year since 1948, not including extra defense appropriations, and this calculation of funding is an underestimate because US appropriations are redeposited in the US treasury, which operates on a deficit. As Israel draws down its account, the US taxpayer pays about \$100 million more in interest per year. Furthermore, loans have been made that are not repaid, and Israel enjoys preferential trade status with the US. This year, congress approved \$3.8 billion to begin on October 1.

In addition to “public assistance” to Israel, private foundations and tax-exempt charities, covered by “religious exemption,” are raising billions of dollars in donations that benefit Jewish settlements. Says Giraldi, “money being fungible, some American Jews have been surprised to learn that the donations they had presumed were going to what they regard as charitable causes have instead wound up in expanding the illegal settlements on the West Bank.” Not long ago, it came to light that a foundation of the family of Jared Kushner, the President’s son-in-law, had made contributions to an Israeli settlement. In his report, Giraldi cites additional ways and means that AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) raises US funds for Israel.¹⁴

Israeli journalist Gideon Levy argues persuasively in April 2016 (*Ha’aretz*) that increasing military aid to Israel, which he calls “armed to the teeth” actually benefits the arms industry as well as “one of the world’s largest weapons exporters” and its army, when “10’s of millions of Americans still have no health insurance,” and he offers the opinion that our senate is “tightening its purse strings despite the challenges of climate change.” Why not condition aid to Israel on appropriate behavior, Levy asks? How can the US look the other way when our resources are being used to destroy homes in Gaza?

The human cost of the occupation is incalculable. To date there has been no progress in ending the dislocation and suffering of the Palestinians. Serious efforts are made in the US by a number of Christian denominations and ecumenical organizations such as Churches for Middle East Peace, Friends of Sabeel-North America, and the Friends Committee on National Legislation; Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace and Peace Now; secular groups, such as the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights and Institute for Middle East Understanding; and a large number of international

¹⁴ For more, go to <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/46865.htm>.

advocacy and humanitarian groups that work tirelessly to educate and motivate action from US legislators and the citizenry.¹⁵

The moral cost of US support for Israel is obscene and indefensible as it continues to support an increasingly racist regime that discriminates against close to one half of the population under its control, including the Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as the West Bank and Gaza. It is impossible to ignore the complicity of the US in looking away as Israel continues its illegal occupation of Palestine and defies international law. There is indigestible hypocrisy in the joint statement from Jason Dov Greenblatt and David Friedman, co-chairs of the Israel Advisory Committee to President Trump as they tout the “unbreakable bond between the United States and Israel based upon shared values of democracy, freedom of speech, respect for minorities, cherishing life and the opportunity for all citizens to pursue their dreams.” In their appeal to the president they argue, among other actions, that the US should cut off funds for the UN Human Rights Council, oppose the UN Security Council; view the efforts to promote boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) as “anti-Semitic,” and recognize Jerusalem as the “eternal and indivisible capital” of the Jewish state.¹⁶

One must ask if our leadership, including congress and legislators at all levels are aware of what is going on. Are their actions guided by a lack of knowledge or understanding? To what extent are decisions influenced by campaign coffers and hopes of re-election? Do they think about ethical implications? What has happened to the values of a nation that once claimed to be founded on Christian teachings?

As he argues for prophetic justice, the Rev. Naim Ateek, a Palestinian-born Anglican priest, theologian, and founder of Sabeel, an international justice and peace movement initiated by Palestinian Christians, dedicates his latest book, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Orbis Books, 2017) to “Jews, Muslims Christians and all people of good will who believe in the power of non-violence and possess the courage to stand and act for justice and peace for all people of the land, and especially for the liberation of the Palestinian people.” Applying his knowledge of the Bible in this book, Fr. Ateek provides an understanding of Palestinian liberation theology and points out how seeking justice requires each one of us to confront the inequities of power structures of oppression. To do this, we must go beyond feeding the poor and hungry, we must confront political systems that perpetuate suffering.

¹⁵ See a comprehensive list compiled by the Foundation for Middle East Peace in 2015 at <https://fmep.org/resource/links-to-peacebuilding-organizations/>.

¹⁶ <https://medium.com/@jgreenblatt/joint-statement-from-jason-dov-greenblatt-and-david-friedman-co-chairmen-of-the-israel-advisory-edc1ec50b7a8>.

Fr. Ateek calls attention to the heart of the biblical message and to “what God wants to do through us in the world that God loves” as seen in the life and teachings of Jesus. In his forward to the book, Walter Brueggemann of Columbia Theological Seminary (4.17) states that in challenging the claim that God’s promises are for “some” but not “all,” this book is a “venture in truth-telling advocacy” that “speaks the truth in the face of the charade of Israeli ideology.”

How can *we* do this, we ask? For suggestions on how to become involved in the search for truth, justice and peace, go to the website of the Bishop’s Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy Land, Episcopal Diocese of Olympia, and look for ways that you can help further this moral mandate (holylandjustice.org). Go to “How to Help” for a comprehensive listing of local and national organizations, as well as international bodies that advocate for Palestinians.

On the “Library” tab, call up the recent and very important UN report entitled “Israeli Practices toward the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid, March 2017,” and read the following conclusion and call for action:

Civil society institutions and individuals also have a moral duty to use the instruments at their disposal to raise awareness of this ongoing criminal enterprise, and to exert pressure on Israel to dismantle apartheid structures and negotiate in good faith for a lasting peace that acknowledges the rights of Palestinians under international law and makes it possible for the two peoples to live together on the basis of real equality.

Apartheid in southern Africa was brought to an end, in part, by the cumulative impact of a variety of measures, including economic sanctions and sports boycotts, undertaken with the blessing of United Nations bodies and many Member States, and with grassroots support in States with strong strategic and economic ties with South Africa. The effectiveness of the anti-apartheid campaign was in large part due to the transnational activism of civil society, which reinforced the intergovernmental consensus that took shape in the United Nations.

A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Pray not for Arab or Jew,
For Palestinian or Israeli,
But pray rather for ourselves,
That we might not divide them
In our prayers, but keep them
Both together in our hearts.

— Based on a prayer by a Palestinian Christian