

JustComment

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Peace is possible for Israel and Palestine!

In 1947 the United Nations

adopted the Palestine Partition Plan in order to establish a homeland for Jewish people following the Holocaust. The plan consisted of two states envisaged for Israel and Palestine, but following wars in 1948 and 1967, all the territory of Palestine, previously under Jordanian and Egyptian control, was occupied by Israel. With the exodus of Palestinians to refugee camps and beyond, the instability of the region grew erupting with a succession of Palestinian uprisings (Intifada). Understanding this conflict is complex as both groups have important historical ties to this land and both have rights to sovereignty and self-determination (www.un.org).

Increasing demonstrations in Israel indicate the growing desperation of people to find a way for peace in this region. However, despite the efforts of peacemakers and activists there are groups on both sides who refuse to acknowledge the right for the other side to exist. More than 1500 Palestinians and 400 Israelis have died since September 2000 and many more have been injured, the vast majority on both sides being civilians. One thing is certain: violence will not resolve the issue. Ultimately the peace and security of each state depends on achieving peace and security for both states.

Why is Peace a Problem?

• The Question of Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a holy city to Jews, Muslims and Christians alike – both Israelis and Palestinians consider

Jerusalem as their capital and the embodiment of their national essence and right to self-determination (www.un.org). The problem especially concerns the Old City, where sacred sites are located for all groups. The international community refuses to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital until its status is agreed upon – most embassies are still in Tel-Aviv.

For Israel: Jerusalem (*Yerushalaim* in Hebrew) is the focus of the Jewish faith and Israel wants the city whole and united to remain forever under Israel's sovereignty (see the Question of Palestine www.un.org).

For Palestinians: Jerusalem (*Al-Quds* in Arabic) is the third holiest sanctuary of Islam. The Palestinian Authority claims that East Jerusalem should be under Palestinian control as the capital of a Palestinian state. Currently East Jerusalem is unable to adequately service the Palestinian population as access to the West Bank is closed, with special permits required to cross military checkpoints into Israel. Palestinians are also unable to obtain building permits or family reunification, and easily lose their residency rights even if they were born in Jerusalem.

• Settlements

Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have continued to grow at an increasing pace since 1993, in contravention to both international humanitarian law and the Oslo agreements (see www.gush-shalom.org). Since the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada, checkpoints have been closed between Palestinian towns and villages.

For Palestinians, settlements on the West Bank are seen as a daily reminder of the ongoing Israeli



Photo courtesy of Alan Pogue, Texas Center for Documentary Photography – featuring Rabbi Arik Ascherman, co-director of Rabbis for Human Rights shaking hands with Atta Jabber in Atta's home near Hebron, to offer moral support and peaceful opposition to housing demolition orders. (www.documentaryphotographs.com)

occupation, even after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994. The policy of expanding settlements hinders the creation of a future, contiguous Palestinian state. Furthermore, utilities like water and electricity are provided to Israelis, with Palestinians watching as settlement lawns are watered behind high fences, while their own taps run dry and agricultural development is halted.

Some Israelis believe that the entire land should be under Israeli control, leading to the establishment of the settlements. However, surveys show that many Israelis disapprove of the actions of the settlers. This led to concessions being made by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, however, the current Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon has returned to a hard-line position, leading to the expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

Web Resources

- Bereaved Families Forum – www.mideastweb.org/Bereaved_Families_Forum.htm
- B'Tselem – www.btselem.org
- The Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT Hebron) - www.prairienet.org/cpt/hebron.php
- Coalition of Women for a Just Peace – www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org
- Gush Shalom – www.gush-shalom.org
- Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) – www.ipcri.org
- Miftah – www.miftah.org
- Palestinian Center for Rapprochement between People – www.rapprochement.org
- Peace Now – www.peace-now.org
- Rabbis for Human Rights – www.rhr.israel.net
- Ta'ayush – taayush.tripod.com/taayush.html
- Yesh Gvul – www.yesh-gvul.org/english.html

• The Problem of Refugees

The establishment of the state of Israel created a major Palestinian refugee problem. It is not clear to what extent Palestinians fled through fear or were driven away forcefully by Israeli troops. The responsibility for the problem is therefore hotly debated and not easily solved. In 2000, The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) registered 3.7 million (1948) refugees, including 820,000 in the Gaza strip, and 580,000 in the West Bank. Tens of thousands additional refugees fled the 1967 war.

For Palestinians: The right to return is guaranteed by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, which affirms the right of each Palestinian refugee to choose to return to his/her home and receive compensation for damages. Home is interpreted by Palestinians to mean the actual houses and villages inside Israel proper where they were living prior to 1948.

For Israel: There is a real fear that a massive return of Palestinians to their 1948 villages would over-

turn the demographic balance of the country and compromise the Jewish character of the State, jeopardising a Jewish homeland. Most Israelis fear that the implementation of the right to return as advocated by Palestinians would in effect deny Israel the right of self-determination. Therefore the Israeli interpretation of the right to return equals the return to Palestinian lands only (West Bank and Gaza Strip). The Law of Return to Israel applies to any Jew wherever he/she was born, but not to Palestinians.

• Lack of trust

The Israeli military campaign in the West Bank since al-Aqsa Intifada, and the continuous suicide bombings targeting Israeli citizens have hardened positions of both sides. Trust is literally non-existent, as both sides accuse the other of not having respected prior agreements (especially the Oslo agreements) and therefore there is great doubt about the reliability of any new negotiated agreement. Fear of terrorism is perpetuating the cycle of mistrust and compromising any willingness to talk, particularly as the violence throughout the region escalates.

Growing Movements for Peace within Israel

There have been renewed movements for peace with groups such as Gush Shalom finding support among increasing segments of the Israeli public. Peace Now recently reported more than 60,000 demonstrators in Tel Aviv demanding that Israel withdraw from the Palestinian territories. Prominent among the Israeli peace movement are organizations such as Bat Shalom (*Daughters of peace*), Women in Black, Machsom Watch (*Checkpoint Watch*), etc., regrouped under the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace. Such women's organisa-

tions have traditionally spearheaded the peace movement.

Initiatives for interfaith dialogue are happening at a grassroots level in Israel/Palestine, bringing Jews, Muslims, Druzes and Christians together in a spirit of dialogue and reconciliation. One such initiative involves *sulha'*, the traditional Arab form of reconciliation used by the House of Hope peace centre in the Northern Galilee. See www.interfaith-center.org/activtis.htm for links to local initiatives.

These groups are calling for an end to the occupation, under the slogan the occupation kills us all, and Jerusalem as a capital for two states. Some organizations have specialised in supporting conscientious objectors (*Yesh Gvul*), bringing humanitarian aid to Palestinian communities (*Ta'ayush*), opposing house demolitions (*ICAHN*, *Rabbis for Human Rights*), or observing the treatment of Palestinians at checkpoints (*Machsom Watch*). Others stage increasing demonstrations inside Israel protesting their governments actions (*Gush Shalom*, *Peace Now*).

Just Action

Check out the above websites and see what peace activists on both sides are working for in their struggle for peace.

What you can do?

- Keep yourself informed and email advocacy groups and members of Parliament.
- Support organizations working for peace with anything from an e-mail of encouragement to a financial contribution.
- Support Israeli soldiers jailed for refusing to serve in the occupied territories by sending them a postcard (contact Yesh Gvul for a list of refuseniks)



Edmund Rice Centre
Awareness ■ Advocacy ■ Action

90 Underwood Road, Homebush NSW 2140

Phone (02) 9764 1330 Fax (02) 9764 1743

Email zeena@erc.org.au Web www.erc.org.au



Australian Catholic University

179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135

Phone (02) 9739 2100 Fax (02) 02 9739 2105