

The State of Affairs – Conflict in the Holy Land

Working with the Department of State on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from 2007 – 2009 opened my eyes and my heart to perspectives and misperceptions that utterly challenged my traditional conservative viewpoint.

My view going into the job was that the *Hand of Providence* had clearly directed the re-birth of the Israeli state, and the 6 day war in 1967 offered as much proof as I would ever need to justify my position fully in support of Israel both politically and theologically.

For the religious, it is easy to presume that the emergence of the Jewish State is a prophetic event, and that its political existence is an affirmation God's fulfillment of His covenant to Abraham, and/or the foretelling of Messiah's imminent return.

However, since I am not a theologian, I cannot speak about the religious meanings or prophecies with theological authority; but as a political operative with a love for Jesus I can alert you that what is happening in the Holy Land is politically untenable, unsustainable and presents a grave challenge to America's fundamental values.

What first alerted me to some of the problems facing the Palestinians was when I went to the West Bank to meet with a group of leaders in Bethlehem. There we met Sami Awad, a U.S.-born citizen whose parents are Palestinian. Sami is a Christian, was born in Kansas, and currently lives in Bethlehem. His organization, the Holy Land Trust, fights injustice through non-violent protests; his focus is on discipleship and protesting the building of the Separation Barrier. He is a modern MLK, Jr., who preceded his ministry by spending 10 days at Auschwitz so he could understand the Jewish narrative. This was Sami's way to follow Jesus literally in obeying the command "Love your enemies."

When we met, Sami had several stitches in his head, and bruises on his face after he had been hospitalized by Israeli soldiers (that's another story). I asked Sami to meet with me later in the week, back in Jerusalem, but he said he could not go into Jerusalem, because his US passport had been stamped by the Israelis that classifies him as a Palestinian and not as an American, therefore he was not allowed to enter Jerusalem. As an American, the re-classification offended my sense of equality as Americans are allowed to freely travel into the West Bank and Israel. Incredibly, this changes if you are a U.S. citizen with Palestinian roots, then you do not keep the same rights as other U.S. citizens.

This really bothered me so I raised the issue with our consulate in Jerusalem, asking the Vice-Consular for an explanation. He informed me that there were currently (in 2007) over 600 cases similar to Sami's, where U.S.-born citizens (of Palestinian descent) were not allowed equal rights as other U.S. nationals once inside Israel. It is the duty of our embassies and consulates to look after the rights of US citizens abroad and so I asked what happened when he reported this back to the State Department in Washington. He said that State then forwarded the messages to the Deputy National Security Advisor,

who put the notices in his desk and locks the drawer so as not to disrupt our relationship with Israel.

Very quickly I learned that there is a two-tiered system for Palestinians living under Israeli governance, and that while many consecutive U.S. administrations have been troubled by this, they quietly acquiesce to this policy.

The Palestinian Christians are doubly vulnerable: they are both Palestinians under occupation, and Christians seeking to maintain their identities in a conflict largely driven by Muslims and Jews. At this point, I could cite multiple injustices that offend the conscience which Palestinian Christians suffer under Israeli occupation. However I want to limit my report to a few systematic and legal disparities which are political in nature.

Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are rarely granted new housing permits and consequently often live in what is termed “illegal housing” – even though the same family may have been living in the same home for a hundred years. Neither the house nor the family changed, but the government did. Thus, because there is a new government authority which issues housing permits, many of these pre-existing homes are therefore technically “illegal” and can “legally” be destroyed by the state of Israel, and they often are. Many view such destructions as *immoral*, but they are *legal*.

Palestinians living in the West Bank live under military law because it is under military occupation (and has been since 1967). People are exposed to arrest and may be detained for 6 months at a time without ever being charged with a crime. *Habeas Corpus* does not apply. Their rights to legal counsel are limited, and they are often denied visits from their family. Court dates do not need to be set, and detention can be renewed each six months without cause. It is estimated that several thousands of Palestinians are locked up under these arrangements.

The threat of being indefinitely locked up is a major factor in how Palestinians view the very visible presence of the Israeli military in the West Bank (there are over 600 checkpoints in the West Bank which are run by the Israeli military). The occupation also gives an unnatural power to immature Israeli soldiers who can capriciously mete out their own version of power wily-nily over Palestinians, and often do so.

The separation barrier being built between Israel and the West Bank is routed to the back of peoples’ homes so that they cannot access the orchards they owned behind their homes. Because they are not allowed on the other side of this 23’ concrete barrier, they cannot tend their fields. If they do not tend their fields, then by Israeli law, they have legally “abandoned them” and the State of Israel may appropriate them. This is most obvious at the entrance into Bethlehem where the wall clearly separates the home from the adjacent olive orchards only a few yards away. The separation barrier goes on from there to expropriate significant portions of the West Bank.

For more than 40 years, Israel has occupied the Palestinian Territories and has not yet declared its own national borders. As the occupying military authority, Israel has a moral

obligation to declare its intent over the territory it holds, yet it has not declared its position, leaving the population there in political limbo.

According to the Geneva Convention (which both Israel and the U.S. have signed) it is illegal for a country to move or relocate their citizens into an occupied territory. However, Israel has moved 450,000 settlers into the West Bank since the 1967 war. Despite the U.S. government's written opposition to these illegal settlements, and our continued public commitment to oppose them, the U.S. continues to give over \$4 billion a year in foreign aid to Israel, a significant share of which directly assists these settlements.

There are 270,000 Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem and are cut off from the West Bank by the separation barrier. Even though they live in Israel they are not given Israeli citizenship, nor can they vote in Israeli national elections. The Palestinian Authority is not allowed to operate in East Jerusalem, so these Palestinians are without any representation and have no citizenship. They are in a no-man's political land who must pay taxes to Israel, but do not get equal rights as other Israeli tax payers. Their schools are not funded to the same levels as Israelis (they are short 1,500 classrooms), their streets are in disrepair (since 1967 very few roads have been paved in East Jerusalem for the Palestinian population), and they do not have standard access to the garbage or sewage system as do the Israeli neighborhoods.

On the other side of the wall, the Palestinians who live in the West Bank earn only 5% of the average Israeli.

Economically, politically and socially the Palestinian Church, and all Palestinians live under a two-tiered system which bases rights on a person's ethnic identity. If you are an Israeli Settler in the West Bank you have the rights. If you are a native Palestinian, you do not. If you are an Israeli Settler in the West Bank you have rights. If you are a native Palestinian, you do not. If you are a American-born Jew you are given Israeli citizenship when you arrive in Israel, and do not have to forfeit your American citizenship. If you are a US born Palestinian, and go to Israel, your passport is stamped and you lose some of your rights as an American. If you are native born Palestinian living in East Jerusalem, you do not have citizenship anywhere. No passport, no vote, no citizenship. 270,000 people living in East Jerusalem have no citizenship, and no direction as to when that might change.

The list goes on and on and the more I learned, the more I listened to the personal experiences of the Palestinian Church. What I learned continued to surprise me, because I realized that the local branch of Christ's church had never figured into my defense of Israel.

As I learned of the political realities for the common Palestinian Christian, I read *Blood Brothers* by Father Elias Chacour and learned his story of systematic Israeli destruction to undermine the Palestinian presence in the Holy land, and then went to meet with him in Haifa. His story continues as he leads the Maronite Church, which continues to suffer

attacks by Jewish Settlers who destroy his buildings, his parishioners' olive groves, and the roads in their community. His response is to rebuild anything destroyed so as to show his own people, that the Kingdom of Heaven is about "building" and not destroying.

Similar to Father Chacour is Mitri Raheb, the pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. His church was used by the Israeli military as their local headquarters in 2002 when Israel invaded Bethlehem. After the army left his church in shambles (more than \$250,000 in uncompensated damages), he directed his students to collect all of the broken glass and sort it by color. He then brought in a stained glass designer who helped his students re-form the broken glass into Christmas ornaments. When he showed me the beautiful pieces, and told me his story, I asked him, "Mitri, where did you get the idea to take something so broken and turn it into something so beautiful." His gentle reply was, "Oh, David, this is the way of the cross, it is what Jesus taught us by taking on our sin, and giving us his righteousness. We must do the same."

The indigenous church in Jerusalem and Bethlehem has roots 2000 years old. Theologically, according to Paul, they are grafted into the covenant, yet politically they are marginalized by the State of Israel.

The Palestinian Church is eroding, much to the detriment of Israel. It is in Israel's long-term security interests to preserve the indigenous church in the Holy Land, but it is unfortunately doing the opposite. In 1948 at the founding of the State of Israel, Jerusalem was 20% Christian, 40% Muslim and 40% Jewish. Now the city is less than 2% Christian and declining still. There is a very coordinated urban plan to artificially limit the native population of Arab-East Jerusalem and accelerate settlements for Israelis or Israeli tourist sites. By forcing out the Christian presence, Israel is isolating itself and narrowing its options for an integrated relationship within the world community.

At this point, it may seem like I'm just listing grievances against Israel. That's not accurate: I'm listing my observations of what I saw as unsustainable practices for a just and free society. I am for a free and secure Israel, yet what I saw from a political perspective is undermining any legitimate political solution for a huge group of people. This is not just an American or Christian perspective, but a growing view amongst Israelis as well.

Danny Seideman is a Jewish Zionist living in Jerusalem who studies the demographics in Jerusalem. He is also the founder of Ir Amim, a watch-dog organization that publishes the facts as to what is actually happening on the ground in Jerusalem. He is an advisor to the State Department and visiting Congressional Delegations. He rightly notes that the Christians of Jerusalem are "the canary in the coal mine." If they die out, then Jerusalem will not only become a religiously impoverished city, but explode. The Christians have been the ameliorating force in Jerusalem who serve as a bridge between the East and the West: as Christians they can relate to the Western Church, as Palestinians they have learned to live in peace with their Muslim neighbors. As residents in Jerusalem they serve as a force for peace. If Jerusalem loses the native Christians, then the extremists from both sides are more greatly empowered to exercise their agenda in the city.

Danny has said most emphatically during all of our visits to Jerusalem that if we are truly the friends of Israel then we must save the Palestinian Church, and engage Israel towards the goal of preventing its policies from undermining the Christians in Jerusalem, their communities and their faith.

Ir-Amin's website is www.ir-amim.org/eng

Interestingly, this is the same message we heard repeatedly from the Muslims in the region: save your Christian brothers in Palestine. It was not so hard to hear this from our Jewish friends, but to hear it from the Muslims was very humbling. And we heard it more than once, and from Muslims outside of Palestine.

While in Beirut during the summer of 2008, we were included in a meeting with a number of American Evangelical pastors and a prominent Shi'ite cleric. It was a very open meeting and one of the pastors asked if the group could do anything for him. His answer: "In Mecca and Medina, our two holiest cities in Islam, they are 100% Muslim. Yet for you, Christians, Bethlehem – one of your holiest cities – the Christians are leaving. This is a shame for you Christians. If you want to do anything to help us, then protect your Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Land."

That was humbling. It was also humbling to realize that Yasser Arafat had made sure that the mayors of Bethlehem and Nazareth always had to be held by Christians, as do a number of the seats in the Palestinian legislature. This is written into law in Palestine in an effort to preserve the Christian minority in Palestine.

I had always thought of Yasser Arafat as a terrorist, not as a friend to Christians, nor to Jews. However, throughout the Holy Land there are contradictions to what we see in the media, or hear from our pulpits. There are many Orthodox Jews living in peace and with respect for their Muslim neighbors, and likewise many Muslim or Christian Arabs who do the same. In fact, the vast majority of people on both sides of the divide eagerly desire peace and are willing to make the concessions needed for it. It is the Jewish and Muslim extremists who exert the most influence on their respective governments; and regrettably some Christians, purporting to be friends of either Israel or Palestine succumb to extremism as well.

As Americans, our legacy has been to uphold the standard that all men -- who are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights -- ought to be treated fairly under the law, and not discriminated because of their race or religion. We must insist that our ally Israel treat all Americans equally as Americans, especially in light of the continued generosity of our foreign assistance (more than \$110 billion to date). Further, we must help Israel reconcile the difficulties of basing their democracy on racial and ethnic identity when such a political foundation undermines the legal equality of those outside that ethnic nationality.

We learned from the righteous response of Christian leaders during the Civil Rights era, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and we are wise to carry that message of justice and Spirit of Christ into the conversation with our brothers and sisters in Palestine, and with our friends in Israel.

For the Lord does not guarantee the righteousness of Israel, or of his Church, but rather issues us a divine challenge to become righteous. The matters described above take place not because Israel or Israelis are evil, but because evil inevitably derives from occupation. Israel rules the West Bank and East Jerusalem poorly because there is no such thing as a righteous occupation.

So, if we truly love Israel and the role destined for her, we must help both sides arrive at an agreement which will end the occupation, and help Israel fulfill the biblical prophecies of justice, mercy and righteousness; while at the same time remembering that according to the scriptures, we are to be one in heart and spirit with the Church in Palestine, bearing their burdens, while they suffer under an unrighteous occupation.

If that does not occur, Israel risks the wrath of God and of the nations. If it lives up to its prophetic mission, Israel will fulfill the role of creating a Holy Land for Jews, Christians and Muslims, worthy of the sanctity that God instilled in this wonderful land.

David Austin was the Executive Director of the Interfaith Cooperative Initiative, under the direction of Ambassador Tony Hall and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. The Initiative was sponsored and coordinated through the U.S. State Department from March, 2007 – July, 2009.