

## My Story and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

By Costandy Saba\*

Since childhood, I have never known peace between Israel and Palestine, or for that matter between Israel and the Arab world. I am a Palestinian refugee who lived through the horror of the Nakba (i.e., disaster) of 1948. In this article I will tell my life story, reflecting on what it's like to live under the occupation and suggest some thoughts on how to break the stalemate between the Palestinians and Israelis so both sides can move on to live in peace.

I was born in 1940 after the Great Depression and before World War II in the city of Jaffa in a Christian home. My parents got married in 1930 and had five children. Finding a job in the thirties was difficult for my father, but he managed to find odd jobs to provide for his family. However, in 1940 he got a full time job working in maintenance at Jaffa Club, which was reserved for the British who were in the country since World War I. Only the British officers had the privilege to come to the club for leisure, dining, and swimming at a beautiful beach setting by the Mediterranean. I vaguely remember chasing Max, our black and white dog, running between the many tables on that huge front porch overlooking the sea. It was a perfect playground for a little boy and his dog. I was much shorter than the tables and my older brother could not see me. I can still hear him yelling my name that it was time to go home. It is so vivid in my mind when I made him wait by ignoring his command.

My brother Saba was six years older than me, attended Tara Santa, a Franciscan Brothers' school for boys. He had a bike and used to give me a ride to school where I attended kindergarten. He really looked after me since my father's job was too demanding. I remember often coming home from school in the middle of the afternoon, taking my outer clothes off and

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leaving them at the front door of our house to join the neighborhood kids half a block down to go swimming at the sea shore.

This serene, simple life was interrupted when more ships started coming from Europe carrying thousands of Jews who were seeking a national home in Palestine. To many Christians in the West, it was a biblical prophecy come true. However, Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world knew that the British broke their promise of giving the Palestinians their independence, a promise they made to the Arabs who helped them defeat the Turks in World War I. As more and more Jews arrived, more and more land and buildings were taken over by the settlers. This continued until 1948 when the British pulled completely out of the country and opened the door for the Jews to take over. With the help of the United Nations, Palestine was divided and the State of Israel was established.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, there were signs of the Zionists taking over Palestine well before the British pulled out in 1948. In the late nineteenth century, there was a cry among the European Jews to go back and claim Palestine as their own homeland. That was the start of the Zionist movement that kept persistently pursuing the dream until it became a reality in 1917 when the British issued the Balfour declaration (Arthur Balfour was the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom) announcing their support for establishing a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine.<sup>2</sup> After World War I, the United Kingdom had the upper hand in Palestine when the allies defeated the Central powers including Turkey which was the dominant power for centuries in the Middle East.

The major historical event that contributed to opening the door for the Jews to acquire the land of Palestine is the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the World War II genocide of the European Jews. Between 1941 and 1945, across German-occupied Europe, Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered some six million Jews, around two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population. As a result, wave after wave of thousands of

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<sup>1</sup> "United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_Partition\\_Plan\\_for\\_Palestine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Partition_Plan_for_Palestine).

<sup>2</sup> "Balfour Declaration, United Kingdom [1917]," *Britannica*, <https://britannica.com/event/Balfour-Declaration>.

Jews came by ship to Palestine which angered the Palestinians who felt betrayed by the British and considered the Jews as invaders. So, sniping and killing began in areas by the sea, especially in our neighborhood, forcing my father to pack up and move us to the inner city where my uncle lived. I vaguely remember tagging along with my brother who was moving some of our belongings on a cart when a sniper bullet hit the cart and missed both of us. But we safely made it to my uncle's and didn't go back for the rest.

### Leaving the country, the exodus

My father told us an interesting story about a British officer who came to the British club where my father worked. He liked my father and wanted to help him. He offered to take him back to England when the British pulled out of the country, with the promise that after the takeover by Zionists he would also help my father to come back and take us to live with him in England. Even though the offer was enticing, my father refused to leave the family behind. As a result, my family wandered in the neighboring

countries for many years with no hope of going back to the land and home that they loved. Many Palestinians left either by force or for fear of being killed. Yet another main reason that encouraged people to leave was the rumor spread by the enemy—to leave now with the hope that when the fighting and sniping stop they would be allowed to go back in a couple of weeks. After seventy-four years that promise has never been fulfilled.



*Costandy and his older brother Saba in front of their house in Jaffa before they left in 1948.*

Fighting intensified, forcing my father to look for a bus or taxi for the family to leave town. Many families had already left the city and transportation was hard to find. He finally found a ride in an open bed truck with five other families going to Nablus, an eastern town. The only clothes and important documents we had were wrapped and carried either in a sheet or a pillow case. After three months, we had to move eastward to find jobs in Amman. Housing was scarce and we ended up living in an unfinished house in part of a development that was under construction but the contractor had to stop building due to the instability in the region. Houses were beautifully built from cut stones but had no floors, windows or doors. My mother hung blankets over the windows and doors for privacy. My father made a living by selling hot food that my mother prepared. He set up his cart along busy intersections. My sister who was a teenager got a job in a candy factory while my two brothers sold cigarettes and I tagged along selling match boxes.

Within a few months, the building contractor asked us to move out so construction could resume. Houses for rent were still scarce and we were at a loss. Luckily, a rich family who lived on a mountain across the valley from the development (Jabal Alweibdeh) offered us a temporary space in a cave they used to store firewood. Since then I have called myself a “cave man.” For a little boy it was a fun-and-games kind of life with lots of adventures, and I left all the worrying about living to the adults in the family. Months passed before our life in Amman ended abruptly when the Red Cross International offered temporary free food and shelter for the refugees in Karameh camp, east of the Jordan River across from Jericho. Refugees were bused by the hundreds to this location. We were surprised to find that a number of the families who had arrived early were living under the open skies because the officials had run out of tents. My father was shocked and tried to bribe the bus driver to take us back to Amman but the police stopped him and threatened to take the driver to jail. We had to stay and fortunately were given one army tent for a family of seven.

### **Schooling for me was a disaster**

By the time I graduated from high school, I had gone to eight schools in three different countries. My first grade was in a tent sitting on the sand at Karameh refugee camp. We had no books, pencils, or notebooks, and the



*Family members standing in front of their tent at the Karameh refugee camp, east bank of the Jordan River across from Jericho. Back row, left to right: father Stephan, Uncle Ibrahim, brother Abe, mother Katbeh; Front row, left to right, Costandy and cousin Issa.*

only piece of furniture was the blackboard. I recall one winter it snowed. It was so unusual to have a snow storm let alone rain in a desert one thousand feet below sea level. We had a great time sledding. But when it warmed up and the grounds dried up, scorpions and snakes came out of the dried crusted grounds. Almost all members of my family were stung. My brothers and I joined other refugee children collecting scorpions and snakes in large tin cans to show the Red Cross the dire conditions we were living in, not to mention putting up with hyenas that roamed in the area.

The heat and living conditions were so unbearable that after three years we managed to leave, seeking better housing and jobs in the Jordan city of Irbid. My father found a job working part time for a missionary. But most importantly, he found the Lord and was baptized. That led the whole family to attend evangelical services.

I remember attending a refugee elementary school in Irbid where I had to walk a mile to get there. Being of a Christian faith, during religion class I was given a choice either to go to recess or attend. In that class, Muslim

BRETHREN IN CHRIST  
HISTORY & LIFE



*Teachers and students at the Mennonite Central Committee boarding junior high school, Beit Jala, West Bank, in 1963. Members of the teaching staff are in the front row, including Walter Martin (center), director of MCC West Bank, and Costandy, second from right.*

children were taught to read and recite the Quran. Reciting the Quran was intriguing so I decided to stay where I learned some fundamentals that later on gave me a huge appreciation for Jesus.

But living in Irbid didn't last long either. Here again, after four years we had to move. However, traveling was fun for me, unlike the adults in my family who were most concerned about jobs, stability, and schooling. So we packed our belongings and headed to Beirut, Lebanon. Because of the internal unrest King Hussein of Jordan was dealing with, he ordered all missionaries and foreigners to leave the country. My father felt he had to move to Lebanon to keep his job with the missionaries. There I completed elementary and high school. After graduating from Beirut Baptist School in 1962, I wanted to go to college but that was impossible because of finances. The president of Haigazian University offered me a scholarship that was not sufficient to cover the tuition, but he promised to keep that offer for a few years to allow me to have a job and save money for college.

Fortunately, that fall I found a job teaching at a junior high school with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Beit Jala in the West Bank

where Walter and Rachel Martin, Brethren in Christ missionaries, were serving as the director for MCC in that region. After I taught for two years, Walter and Rachel sponsored me to attend Messiah College. While I was at Messiah, the war of 1967 (the Six Day War) broke out where Israel defeated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, capturing the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights. and the Sinai Peninsula. That shut the door for me to go back and teach at Beit Jala since Israel blocked the return of Palestinians to the West Bank.

### **The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

My story requires some background information on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The history of ancient Israel is very much connected to the land of Palestine. This land came to be known as the Holy Land. However, if you read about the history of this land, it is anything but holy. Over the years, powerful nations have invaded and exploited the Holy Land. Every region of Palestine has seen its share of bloody conflict. After a failed uprising against Roman rule in 135 A.D., the majority of Jews scattered throughout Europe and the Middle East. The explanation for the Zionists'



*Costandy saying goodbye to his family at the Beirut, Lebanon harbor right before boarding the ship to the United States in 1964 where he will attend Messiah College. Left to right, father Stephan, brother Saba, sister-in-law Laila, mother Katbeh, Costandy, sister Janet.*

presence in Palestine is this: “We simply came to Palestine to reclaim our ancestral homeland. We bought land and started building settlements. But the Palestinians violently opposed our endeavor, stemming from their inherent anti-Semitism. As a result we were forced to defend ourselves. And so this hostility and hatred continue today.”

The problem with this explanation is that it is simply not true. What really happened was that the Zionist movement, beginning in the late nineteenth century, looked forward to expelling the Palestinian population so that Palestine could be a wholly Jewish state. Any land acquired and held in the name of the Jewish people could never be sold or given back to the Palestinians.

The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 242 on November 22, 1967.<sup>3</sup> The resolution was used as a framework to implement the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But since then, Israel has violated the resolution by occupying more Palestinian territories through illegal settlements. Zena Tahan reports that fifty years after Resolution 242 was passed, there were 600,000 to 750,000 illegal settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, over one hundred and fifty settlements, 42 percent of West Bank land controlled by settlements, and 86 percent of East Jerusalem claimed for Israeli state and settler use.<sup>4</sup>

Jewish immigration and land buying threatened the very existence of the Arabs in Palestine. The Zionists’ invasion never could have been realized without the military support of the British that was based on a mistaken, colonial view that the rights of the Palestinians didn’t matter, even though the vast majority of the population in Palestine had been Arabs since the seventh century A.D. Therefore, the Arabs’ opposition to Zionism wasn’t based on anti-Semitism but rather on a reasonable fear of being taken over by yet another nation and driven out of their land.

As we have seen, the root cause of the Palestine-Israel conflict is clear. During the 1948 war, 750,000 Palestinians (my family included) either fled in terror or were actively expelled from their homeland and turned into

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<sup>3</sup> “United Nations Security Council Resolution 242,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_Security\\_Council\\_Resolution\\_242](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council_Resolution_242).

<sup>4</sup> Zena Tahan, “Israel’s settlements: Over 50 years of land theft explained,” *Aljazeera*, updated: January 27, 2020, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2017/50-years-illegal-settlements/index.html>.

## SABA: My Story



*Costandy tours Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, October 2017. He is visiting with a little refugee boy who lives in dire conditions at the camp (what does the future hold for that little boy?). Currently, inside Israel, there are twenty-seven refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with a total population of over two million.*

refugees. At the end of 2021, the estimated number of Palestinians in the world was about fourteen million: 3.2 million in the West Bank, 2.1 million in the Gaza Strip, 1.9 million in the 1948 territories, 6.3 million in Arab countries, and 0.75 million in foreign countries.<sup>5</sup> The state of Israel has refused to allow them to return and either destroyed their villages entirely or confiscated their land, orchards, houses, businesses, and personal possessions to make room for the Jewish population. Elias Chacour writes about his entire village of Biram that was destroyed to prevent villagers from returning to their homes.<sup>6</sup>

I would like to encourage you to explore the internet and other literature that are full of references to this conflict. You will be inundated with references to the history, the timeline of developments, and the causes

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<sup>5</sup> Ola Awad, President of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, "Brief Report on The Population of Palestine at the End of 2021," Arab Center Washington DC, January 3, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/brief-report-on-the-population-of-palestine-at-the-end-of-2021/>.

<sup>6</sup> Elias Chacour, David Hazard, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013) 86.

that crippled relations between the two sides, along with some suggested workable policies for conflict resolution.

Amnesty International is a movement of ten million people that campaigns for human rights. They describe the cruel system of domination and crimes against humanity as Israel's apartheid against Palestinians. Their findings reveal territorial fragmentation, segregation and control, dispossession of land and property, and denial of economic and social rights. Amnesty International has also documented Israel's unlawful acts, including forcing people out of their homes, detention and torture, unlawful killings, and denial of basic rights. In 2018, I personally witnessed on live-stream Israeli authorities demolish the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar near Jerusalem.

The Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa has released a study indicating that Israel is practicing both colonialism and apartheid in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). BBC reports what Human Rights Watch says: "Israel is committing the crimes of apartheid and persecution against Arabs in OPT that amounts to state-sanctioned racial discrimination and is considered a crime against humanity."<sup>7</sup> But Israel's foreign ministry has rejected the report as "preposterous and false."

On March 25, 2022 in Geneva, United Nations expert Michael Lynk called on the international community to adopt his current report, based on recent findings by Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights organizations, that apartheid is being practiced by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory:

Living in the same geographic area, but separated by walls, checkpoints, roads and a military presence, are more than three million Palestinians, who are without rights, living under an oppressive rule of institutional discrimination and without a path to a genuine Palestinian state. . . . Therefore, there is an overwhelming evidence that the system instituted by the Israeli government

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<sup>7</sup> "Israel committing crimes of apartheid and persecution – HRW," BBC News, April 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56898864>.

<sup>8</sup> "Israel's 55-Year Occupation of Palestinian Territory is Apartheid: UN Human Rights Expert," United Nations, March 25, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/israels-55-year-occupation-palestinian-territory-apartheid-un-human-rights>.

against the Palestinians meets the UN definition of apartheid.<sup>8</sup>

### **The crimes committed by Israel**

Palestinian refugees and their descendants, who were displaced during the wars of 1948 and 1967, continue to be denied the right to return to their homes. And more than 14,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem have had their residency revoked.

On August 18, 2022 Amnesty International reported that Israeli armed forces raided the Ramallah offices of Addameer, al-Haq, Defense for Children International—Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Bisan Center for Research and Development, Health Work Committees, and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees, and confiscated files and equipment. They also issued military orders to close them down and welded shut their office doors. These organizations have contributed enormously to human rights in the OPT and elsewhere, yet the Israeli army shut down their work.

Since its establishment, Israel has pursued a policy of maintaining a Jewish demographic majority, and maximizing control over land and resources. A message posted online in March 2019 by Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said, "Israel is not a state of all its citizens . . . [but rather] the nation-state of the Jewish people and only them."<sup>9</sup> In 1967, Israel extended this policy to the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the Golan. Palestinians believe Israelis have the right to self-determination, and do not challenge Israel's desire to be a home for Jews. But they do not agree that Israel is a "Jewish state," since that in it itself indicates an intention to oppress, dominate, and expel Palestinians.

Thirty-five Bedouin villages, home to 68,000 people, are currently "unrecognized" by Israel, which means they are cut off from health care, education, electricity, and water supply, and targeted for repeated demolition to force them to leave their homes and villages so Israel can build more settlements.

Many military checkpoints, roadblocks, fences, and other structures

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<sup>9</sup> "Benjamin Netanyahu Says Israel is Not a State of All of Its Citizens," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/10/benjamin-netanyahu-says-israel-is-not-a-state-of-all-its-citizens>.

control the movement of Palestinians within the OPT, and restrict their travel into Israel or abroad. More than four hundred miles of fence/wall, which Israel continues to extend, have isolated Palestinian communities inside “military zones.” Palestinians must obtain special permits any time they enter or leave their homes. In Gaza, more than two million Palestinians live under an Israeli blockade, creating a humanitarian crisis.

### Options for conflict resolution

International consensus is unanimous for a two-state solution, with a sovereign Palestinian state, yet that is not on Israel’s radar. Under the current situation, Israel proceeds to annex the entire West Bank, and Palestinians will have no option but to struggle for their rights. Furthermore, Israelis would even reject a one-state solution on the grounds of what is called a “demographic problem”: there would be too many non-Jews living in a Jewish state. Due to the uncontested domination of Israel in the region, some have suggested it is similar to the single-state regime that existed in apartheid South Africa where the white nationalists minority ruled the black majority and depended on their labor to run the country. The correlation often made to apartheid South Africa is somewhat misleading since Israel wants nothing at all from the Palestinians but for them to leave. Noam Chomsky, professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had an interesting observation when he said, “In the Occupied Territories, what Israel is doing is much worse than apartheid.”<sup>10</sup>

In his book, *Beyond the Two-State Solution*, Jonathan Kuttub concluded that the two-state solution failed and the two sides need to move on perhaps to a one-state solution.<sup>11</sup> I personally don’t believe this would be acceptable, since the alternative has never been a one-state solution. The two-state solution would be more realistic and continues to have unanimous support in the international community. That would normalize the relations

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<sup>10</sup> “Noam Chomsky: Israel’s Actions in Palestine are ‘Much Worse than Apharteid’ in South Africa,” *Democracy Now!*, August 8, 2014, [https://www.democracynow.org/2014/8/8/noam\\_chomsky\\_what\\_israel\\_is\\_doing](https://www.democracynow.org/2014/8/8/noam_chomsky_what_israel_is_doing).

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Kuttub, *Beyond the two-state solution*, (n.p.: Nonviolence International, 2021).

between Israel and Palestine if and when Israel recognizes and honors the 1967 international borders.

Furthermore, the existing state of affairs guarantees Israel's exploitation of Palestinian territories. Nickolay Mladenov, United Nations Special Coordinator to the Middle East Peace Process, told the UN Security Council in New York, "The continuing status quo in the occupied Palestinian territory reduces the prospect for sustainable and just peace between Israelis and Palestinians." He went on to restate its consensus "that the two-state solution is the only outcome that legitimately meets the national goals of both people. . . . The alternative is an open-ended occupation, a perpetual conflict which breeds anger among the people of Palestine and Israel, and feeds radicals across a Middle East torn already by ethnic and religious strife."<sup>12</sup>

United Nations Resolution 242 called for Israeli withdrawal from "territories" it had occupied in 1967 in exchange for peace with its neighbors. Since the war of 1967, Palestinians have accepted the reality of Israel within the first 1948 boundaries. The Oslo Accords of 1993 between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization have failed due to an ongoing mistrust and anger between Palestinians and Israelis. As Israel maintains its illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip, punishing its residents and causing humanitarian crisis there, Noam Chomsky wrote about an old man in Gaza who held a sign that read: "You take my water, burn my olive trees, destroy my house, take my job, steal my land, imprison my father, kill my mother, bombard my country, starve us all, humiliate us all, but I am to blame: I shot a rocket back."<sup>13</sup>

### **Peace efforts continue**

Since the 1967 Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, Jews for Justice in the Middle East and Christian organizations like MCC and Pilgrims of Ibillin have supported the work

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<sup>12</sup> Nikolai Mladenov, "Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East, Reporting on UNSCR 2334 (2016)," (speech, United Nations Security Council, New York, December 21, 2020), [https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/UNSCOSECCOSTATE\\_211220.pdf](https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/UNSCOSECCOSTATE_211220.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Noam Chomsky, "Noam Chomsky: the Assault on Gaza," *Truthout*, December 4, 2012, <https://truthout.org/articles/noam-chomsky-the-assault-on-gaza/>.



*During his tour of the West Bank in October 2017, Costandy talks with Laila Nour, director of development at Hope School in Beit Jala (formerly known as Mennonite Central Committee Junior High) where he taught for two years before he came to the US in 1964.*

of both Palestinians and Israelis who are committed to nonviolence, peace, justice, and reconciliation for both peoples.

The Israeli government could solve the Palestine-Israel crisis today if they wanted to. It actually would be in the best interests for its citizens to do so because random acts of terrorism against Israelis would cease if Palestinian demands for a viable, independent state were accepted and compensation for Arab losses made.

Here in America, Jews hold positions of power and influence. At the very least, American Jews need to categorically state that they cannot condone Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land and the intentional murder and crippling of Palestinian protestors armed only with rocks, as documented in reports by the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Israeli groups like B'Tselem, etc. According to a survey commissioned by the five largest

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<sup>14</sup> "Conclusion I for Jewish Readers," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, March 15, 2011, <https://www.wrmea.org/jews-for-justice/conclusion-i-for-jewish-readers.html>.

## SABA: My Story

American Jewish organizations, 20 percent of American Jews support Palestinian demands and 35 percent say that Jerusalem should be shared.<sup>14</sup> These are really impressive results in the face of a biased media that's against the Palestinian position. Israeli peace groups rightfully criticize their government. American groups like the Jewish Peace Lobby, Jewish Voice for Peace and the Middle East Children's Alliance also deserve to be heard.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has been present in the Middle East since 1949 and supports the efforts of both Palestinians and Israelis committed to nonviolence and to a future of peace, justice and reconciliation for both peoples. [The Brethren in Christ Church is a member denomination of MCC.]

The Council for Arab-British Understanding is a not-for-profit cross-party organization whose mission is to work for a British Middle East policy that promotes conflict resolution, human rights, and civil society in the Arab world through informed debate and mutual understanding.

Six years ago, in 2017, my wife Beth and I had the privilege to go to Israel. It was a bittersweet experience for me. It was sweet to see the land where I was born but never got to know. It was great to see holy sites and to interact with both Arabs and Jews who are created in the image of God. Yet



*In October 2017, Beth and Costandy joined the Pilgrims of Ibillin on a tour to meet the peacemakers in Israel and Palestine. It was the first time Costandy saw his birthplace since he and his family left in 1948. After touring the Old City of Jaffa, Beth and Costandy stand in front of Terra Santa school where he attended kindergarten.*

it was bitter to see a land that is divided and insecure—a land that is called the Promised Land yet is full of unrealized promises.

Our tour bus took us to places on both sides where we walked an average of four miles per day exploring and admiring holy sites, historical ruins, visiting, and listening to people's stories. Our hearts were stirred to see people trying to live a normal life amid uncertainties and insecurities. I wondered whether there is any future resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I believe the following suggestions need to be considered for a state in which Palestinians and Israelis would live together in equality and harmony.

1. Any resolution of the conflict should be examined according to the word of God in relation to land and human relationships. I believe that ultimately the land belongs to God: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (Lev. 25:23).

Followers of Jesus are not called to take sides as Paul reminds us in Romans 12:10: "[T]here is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all." God also reminds his people to "not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. (Exod. 22:21). God also requires his people to "[f]ollow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Deut. 6:20). One of my favorite verses describes what the Lord requires of us: "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

2. My heart is broken to see that the Holy Land falls far short of this biblical vision, with neither Palestinians nor Israelis enjoying peace and reconciliation. Just as Palestinians face uncertainty and insecurity, so do Israeli Jews. A minority of Palestinians rejects ongoing Jewish occupation and sometimes resorts to attacks on Israeli military forces and civilians. Like Palestinians, Israelis have known the suffering and loss of death and injury.

Today, life in the land is one of alienation, insecurity, and hostility. As followers of Jesus who are committed to Christ's way of peace, we deplore all forms of violence, especially attacks against civilians. We mourn with those who lost loved ones in this conflict, and hope for the day when both sides will live in peace and harmony.

3. I believe that we all are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). In

the new kingdom, no one is elevated above others (Gal. 3:28). We all stand on the same level at the foot of the cross. Therefore, any idea or political agenda that seeks the expulsion or subordination of either Palestinians or Israelis should be rejected.

I support schools like Hope School in Beit Jala and Mar Elias School in Ibillin where children are taught the way of Jesus's peace and reconciliation at a tender age. I also support organizations advocating peace, justice and reconciliation like Christian Peace Keepers in the West Bank, Wi'am, Dar El Kalema and Siraj in Bethlehem, who through education, literature, arts, and music teach children, youth, and families peace and reconciliation.

To summarize, Rev. Mitri Raheb, author of several books including *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble* said in another book: "the land happens to be the homeland of two peoples. Each of them should understand this land to be a gift of God to be shared with the other. Peace and the blessing on the land and on the two peoples will depend on this sharing. Only then will the biblical promises be fulfilled."<sup>15</sup>

Please pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

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<sup>15</sup> Mitri Rahib, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 80.