

# **The Road to Palestine and Israel**

**December, 1999**

There is an atmosphere of despair in Palestine these days that has led nearly every grassroots Palestinian community leader to conclude that the region is headed not toward peace and reconciliation but a whole new explosion, all out war.

For two weeks in November, 1999, I journeyed through Palestine and Israel with an interfaith Fellowship of Reconciliation delegation that included Lynn Gottlieb, a rabbi and peace activist from New Mexico; Tarik El Heneidy, a Muslim peace activist from Boston; Doug Hostetter, a Mennonite and coordinator of international projects for FOR; Bill Pickerd, a Catholic priest and friend from Scranton, Pennsylvania; and Bob Keck, my dear friend and a Jesuit priest from my community back home in New York City.

We stayed in Palestinian homes, met hundreds of Palestinian grassroots activists in the West Bank and Hebron, as well as key Israeli Jewish peace activists, hoping to hear the good news of peace and reconciliation. Instead, we heard only the bitter resentment of despair and predictions of future destruction.

During our first week, we stayed with Palestinian families in Beit Sahour outside of Bethlehem, the site of a massive, city-wide nonviolent resistance movement during the Intifada of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

"The situation remains very difficult," Zoughbi Zoughbi told us. Zoughbi is an old friend I have known from his visits to the Resource Center for Nonviolence in California. He is the director of the Palestinian Wi'am Center for Nonviolent Conflict Resolution in Bethlehem. "Settlements continue to be built, the prisoners are still locked up, Palestinians are not allowed to travel freely, and we have no control over water or land. New Israeli military check points pop up daily. Three and a half million Palestinians suffer in the West Bank, Hebron and Gaza while another three and a half million Palestinian refugees are scattered throughout the world, not able to return to their homelands.

"We need to gain control over ourselves, but the Israelis want us for a captive market, for cheap labor," Zoughbi continued. "Our situation resembles the U.S. Native American reservations. We don't have any sovereignty. Our land has been divided into areas A, B, or C. Our eight cities are surrounded by Israeli military security forces. Ethnic cleansing is practiced here yet the world ignores it. We need the support of the world community if we're going to move ahead. We simply want justice and peace. Real justice will bring true security for all of us.

"Through action and daily engagement," Zoughbi concluded, "we find hope. We are living nonviolence. It's very empowering, a totally engaging process. Nonviolence is an instrument of change. But it is not easy. It is a way of life, and it comes with a price. We can't be shocked when the other side responds with violence. While we speak, while the peace process continues, Israel bombs Lebanon, and the U.S. continues to bomb Iraq. We are struggling to survive and to preserve our dignity."

Then we met with Jad Isaac of the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem. He took out maps and showed us how Israel is slowly cornering the Palestinians, trapping them into a new form of apartheid. The Israelis have occupied three times the amount of land that the Palestinians have. Jad led the civil disobedience movement in Beit Sahour during the Intifada, spent six months in jail, and served as a Palestinian negotiator at the Wye River accords. These days, like most Palestinians, he is very discouraged. "We should be more outspoken," he said. "Even though we have a just cause, we Palestinians have lost our spirit since the end of the Intifada."

In Jerusalem, we met with Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and the Alternative Information Center, a Jewish activist working against Israeli militarism. The AIC is a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization resisting Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes, helping to rebuild them, and bringing hundreds of sympathetic Israelis into Palestinian territory. "Right now, we are at a juncture," Jeff began. "We are heading either toward a viable, just peace or apartheid. And it looks like it's going to be apartheid. The new settlements are part of a master plan. Israel is building an east-west road dividing the West Bank into north and south."

Jeff said that the majority of Jewish Israelis want peace with the Palestinians. "Only 1,500 of the 200,000 people in the West Bank are right-wing settlers. The Israelis feel they're in control of the Palestinians. Barak is a general, and all his aides are generals. Security is everything. All the land and roads around Palestinian cities are controlled by Israel. That's apartheid. That's a reservation. Because of that, the Palestinians have no faith in the peace process. It's lost. This current peace process is a cold, dead peace. There's no discussion about removing soldiers or checkpoints. There will always be war and preparations for future wars. There will be no real Palestine. Israel will keep control."

"Palestinians think Israel wants permanent control--apartheid--and they're right," Jeff concluded. "Israel has no vision or commitment to a viable peace. If there is no viable Palestinian state, the only thing left is apartheid. Meanwhile, the Palestinians feel they're being sold out by their own leadership, that their leadership is corrupt. A few years after a peace deal, if it happens, there will surely be another uprising. Palestine will explode, this time against Israel and the Palestinian authority."

We then visited with Jewish activists at Bet Shelem, a human rights research center run by progressive Israelis to monitor human rights violations. The number of Palestinian deaths and injuries at the hands of the Israeli military has dropped, they told us, but Israeli soldiers still use lethal weapons on demonstrators. "Over 60 Palestinians, half of them children, have been killed in recent years by Israel's rubber bullets," one researcher said. "Israeli soldiers are told to aim low, so they aim at legs in a crowd, and end up killing, blinding and maiming children. Thousands of Palestinians have been routinely tortured in Israel. The High Court recently ruled that torture must stop 'except in extreme cases.' Parliament may still legalize torture. Meanwhile, over 2000 Palestinian homes have been legally demolished by Israelis in the last ten years and over 10,000 Palestinians have been made homeless. According to international law, the settlements are illegal. Yet they continue and Palestinians cannot get building permits."

Later, we heard that while we were meeting, the Israeli government tore down several thousand ancient olive trees in a Palestinian area. Olive trees are often hundreds of years old, and take at least thirty-five years before they bear fruit. An

olive tree often stays in one family for hundreds and hundreds of years. This destruction is another catastrophe perpetrated by the Israeli government.

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From 1988 to 1991, the entire community of Beit Sahour nonviolently non-cooperated with the Israeli military. Every household refused to pay taxes. They spent four difficult years in permanent nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation. Though they lived day and night under curfew, were not allowed to travel, faced hunger and tanks, their active nonviolence inspired all Palestinians. They practiced massive nonviolent civil disobedience as a way of life with unanimous popular support. The Israeli government feared that this nonviolent resistance might inspire all Palestinians to resort to Gandhi's method of complete nonviolent non-cooperation. And so, the Israeli military set about to crush the entire village through total repression.

During our days in Beit Sahour, staying in the homes of villagers, we heard horrific stories about the twenty-four hour day curfew, the endless harassment by the military, and the arrest of nearly every man in the village. Every single family had its home raided by Israeli soldiers. Yet the Palestinians did not fight back or kill. They simply refused to cooperate. They learned to support one another, set up their own schools, shared their food with one another, and prayed together. Though their example did inspire other Palestinians, the years of Israeli military repression wore them down. After years of intimidation, violence and imprisonment, the Palestinians felt crushed and burnt out. Sadly, they did not receive sufficient international solidarity. Nor did they have the necessary wide scale training in nonviolence, such as the People Power movement organized in the Philippines.

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Back in Beit Sahour, we met with Ghassan Adoni, director of the Centre of R'approachment, and a hero of active nonviolence and reconciliation. His small group has organized nonviolent resistance for years, including a massive tax resistance against the Israeli occupation. They also started 35 underground schools and community gardens. All its founders have been arrested and jailed. Ghassan was arrested four times, and spent three and a half years in prison. Of course, like every Palestinian male, he would have been tortured by the Israelis. But we did not discuss his experience in prison at the hands of the Israelis.

Eleven years ago, he organized the first public dialogue between the two opposing sides. These public sessions have continued once a month up to today. "During wartime, it's dangerous to meet with the enemy," Ghassan said. "But we are trying to find the human side of the enemy. We talk, find common ground, and engage in projects together. We shout, we scream at each other, but there's a certain level of trust. The goal is simply to bring people together from each side and to allow them to recognize each other as human beings. The problem is not about understanding. They both understand each other completely. The conflict cannot be solved by dialogue, but dialogue can humanize the struggle.

"A whole generation of Palestinian male youth was arrested and tortured," Ghassan explained. "Today, we suffer chronic trauma. It's not a healthy society. The Intifada generation is traumatized and defeated. We are waiting for a new generation to

come forward with a vision of nonviolent resistance. But the situation is complicated. There are many human rights abuses by the Palestinian Authority. We don't want an apartheid system, set up and blessed by the whole world in the name of peace. Nonviolent resistance in a society is a sign of a health. The outburst is coming. It's inevitable. So we are trying to train young people to become leaders, so that our future leaders have vision and a better chance for a lasting peace with justice."

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Next, we visited the Dehaishe refugee camp, the largest Palestinian refugee camp where 11,000 people, half of them children, have lived in poverty for decades. Palestinians have been tear gassed, tortured, arrested, shot at, and killed here. They live under permanent curfew.

"I think we will have a new Intifada," our guide said as we walked through the dirty streets. "Next time, it will be much more violent. The CIA is everywhere. They are teaching the Israeli military and police, and the Palestinian police as well, how to control and oppress us. Meanwhile, millions of Palestinian refugees simply want to return to their home villages. We are fed up with the oppression and bloodshed. We don't care which government rules. We want to decide where we can live. We want our dignity again."

Back in Bethlehem at the AIC, Palestinian peace activists told us that a ceasefire and settlement may one day come, but it will not last. "Instead of moving toward real peace," one activist said, "the Middle East has returned to the turmoil of the early 1970s. The next generation will pay the price. We had a window of opportunity, to negotiate a true peace, but we have closed it. Now all kinds of guns flow into Palestine. People are arming themselves. Palestinians even buy guns from Israelis."

"The Palestinian people have lost hope in the peace process," another friend in Beit Sahour said. "There is no discussion about the settlements or the house demolitions or the millions of Palestinian refugees outside of Israel who want to return home. The goal of the Palestinians in the current negotiations is to achieve a Palestinian state at any price in Arafat's lifetime. But that will not satisfy the need for justice for the suffering people."

Last week, at one of the main Israeli military checkpoints next to Rachel's Tomb, a twelve year old Palestinian boy was shot and killed. He had offered to light a cigarette for an Israeli soldier. Another Israeli soldier, standing on a rooftop across the street, saw the boy reach into his pocket, and shot him. The boy died instantly. The walls throughout Palestine are covered with paintings of the boy's face. The Palestinians grieve his death and seethe with anger at the Israeli military.

Later, in Jerusalem, we met with the director of "Rabbis for Human Rights." Then, we attended a beautiful Shabat service at a reformed synagogue. We sang, heard scripture readings, and prayed earnestly for peace with the Palestinians. Afterwards, we drove to Hebron, where we stayed for the remainder of the visit.

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The ancient city of Hebron has 150,000 Palestinian residents. It is honored as the sacred burial ground of Abraham and Sarah. But recently, three hundred Jewish settlers have forced their way in, bringing with them 1,200 Israeli soldiers. The settlers and their soldiers have terrorized the Palestinians, taken over their homes, and built new armed settlements right on top of Palestinian apartments and homes.

In the center of Hebron stands the ancient mammoth structure, the "Tomb of the Patriarchs," the symbolic resting place of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca. Part mosque, part synagogue, it is now a military bunker. In February, 1994, a deranged Jewish settler originally from Brooklyn walked into the middle of a Muslim prayer service in the Mosque and opened fire with a machine gun, killing 29 Muslims as they were bent over in prayer. Dozens more were injured. The angry crowd killed him on the spot. Now the murderer is revered by settlers as a hero and a martyr. Jewish children are taught to sing songs in his honor.

The Tomb of the Patriarchs symbolizes the Israeli-Palestinian war. There one finds religious fanaticism mixed with fervent prayer and scripture study; bloodshed and war mixed with a shared history and a common life; brothers and sisters living side by side, hating each other, worshipping the same God within inches of one another, sharing a rich tradition, yet unable to forgive and reconcile, torn by bitterness and hatred.

Just over the marketplace, on the second floor of an obscure run-down apartment building, lives the Christian Peacemaker Team, a permanent, full-time presence of Christians from the United States and Europe who work as unarmed peacemakers in Hebron, monitoring the daily situation, listening to the Palestinians, keeping vigil for peace, and intervening nonviolently as violence erupts.

We arrived at the apartment and met our new CPT friends. Then, we spent a few hours talking with Abdul Hedy Ladash, a Palestinian whose house was demolished three times by Israeli soldiers. He directs the Palestinian Land Defense Committee, which tries to use the law to fight Israeli house demolitions. He explained how the Israelis are slowly taking over small areas throughout the Hebron district. They are dividing the region up, he said, evicting the Palestinians, and terrorizing everyone. These fanatical, violent settlers claim that God promised to give the Jews this promised land and so they are literally reclaiming it for Judaism, and they are willing to kill to do so.

"There are 31 settlements at the moment, all strategically set up to surround Palestinian villages," Ladash explained. "Thirty six percent of the land in the district has been confiscated. Meanwhile, Israeli authorities harass Palestinians in every aspect of life. Palestinians are not allowed to leave the district. They cannot even go to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Palestinian authority is not that interested in their struggle.

"There will never be peace in this region as long as Israel acts in this way," he concluded. His wife and daughter sat nearby as he spoke, nodding their heads in solemn agreement. "Palestinians are prisoners in an occupied land. The whole region will explode."

The day before we arrived, ten tents were erected by settlers in the southern part of Hebron. They intend to start a new settlement. They are digging themselves in and claiming that the land they have stolen is theirs.

Next, we met with Palestinian peace activist Hisham Sharabati, who runs a center that monitors Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians as well as violations by the Palestinian Authority. He told us that the situation in Hebron now is much worse than it was ten years ago. He also said the whole region is going to explode soon.

Afterwards, we drove out to the countryside, to the village of Dura on the outskirts of the Hebron district, to visit the home of Khaled Amayreh a leading Palestinian journalist. Known throughout the world for his political commentaries, Amayreh, like all Palestinians, cannot travel thirty miles to Jerusalem without being arrested. Even though he faces arrest, imprisonment and assassination, he continues to speak out against the Israeli occupation.

"One would like to be hopeful and say that peace will prevail," he said at the beginning. "However, when we look at the political reality around us, it's hard to be hopeful. Our village has no clean water. The peace process has set us back. The occupation has become more efficient. Palestinians are more frustrated than ever before. The Palestinian Authority is accountable to Israel, not to the Palestinian people. Arafat has never held elections or allowed local areas to choose their own mayors. In reality, the United States discourages democracy, law, and the court system. Arafat is the law. So the situation is very bleak. We are living under a mafia, with many security agencies. It's a police state without a state. We have no freedom of speech or press. The people are demoralized, and there is no hope for change as long as Arafat is around. The United States has made him indispensable. The challenge for us is not to give in to despair, but to prepare now in hope for the post-Arafat future."

One American official told him recently that democracy and human rights are not the priority for the United States. The U.S. only wants an agreement between Israel and Arafat. "I would like to tell you good news," he concluded, sipping his coffee, "but I would not be honest if I did. You have to tell people the truth. No agreement will bring peace without sweeping changes for everyone."

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"I'm hopeful that the post-Arafat era will be much better," another Palestinian peace activist told us back in Hebron. "We have no democracy. There is a High Court of Justice, but there are no laws. Instead, we have a kind of frozen rage. There will definitely be another Intifada. The next Intifada will be aimed at Israel, the Palestinian state and the settlers. Israelis can have peace with Arafat but not with Palestinians. There may someday be an arrangement, but it will be an imposed settlement. We want justice; the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Golan; and the full return of all Palestinian refugees. This is the bare minimum."

"We can live together and we can live equitably," our Palestinian friend said. "Live and let live should be our goal. But it is a scandal that my neighbor has water and I don't. We have nothing against Jews. We have lived together for 1400 years! We

have common religious roots. We should all live together. What we need is goodwill on all sides. We don't have that. There is nothing moral or ethical about the peace process. When we talk about refugees, land, houses, water, and human rights, they call us terrorists! We are all born free. All humans deserve human rights. They are guaranteed by international law. But here, we are denied them."

Another Palestinian friend told us later that the Palestinian authority has ten separate security systems. Arafat has thousands of soldiers in his own personal guard. Everybody can arrest everybody. After Arafat dies, they will all fight one another. And meanwhile, Israel and the United States make a fortune selling guns, weapons and grenades to the Palestinians.

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Is there any hope for this broken, bitter land? During our visit, we saw two living signs of hope. First, we were amazed and inspired by the Hope Flowers Secondary School, a Palestinian school "for peace and democracy," run by Hussein Ibrahim Issa, with over one hundred Palestinian students. The mission of the school is to teach peace to the children. They learn both Hebrew and Arabic. Israelis teach alongside Palestinians. "The main philosophy of the school is to teach respect and to see our common humanity in the enemy," Issa said. His work appears very simple and non-threatening, but it is extremely rare and even dangerous, and needs international support.

As we listened to him, not far away on a rocky hillside, twenty Israeli vehicles gathered to start a new Jewish settlement on Palestinian land. They want to take over the surrounding countryside, and maybe one day, even the school. Nevertheless, the Hope Flowers School carries on. The children learn the lessons of peace. They are taught not to hate but to reconcile. The school is a sign of hope and a symbol of peace for everyone. It should be the model for every school in the Middle East.

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Another beautiful sign of hope is Neve Shalom, an intentional, community village of thirty-five Israeli and Palestinian families living and working together. Its name means "Oasis of Peace," and it is literally an oasis of peace, located right in the middle of the war zone. Standing on a hill right on the border between Israel and the West Bank in "no man's land," Neve Shalom was leased twenty five years ago by a neighboring Trappist monastery who once owned all the land in the region. The monastery hoped their gift would be a gesture toward peace and reconciliation.

"There is equality on all sides here," one of the directors said to us as we walked through the village. "It's difficult to manage and full of challenges, but we keep trying." In the center of the village, we visited the "School of Peace," where Israeli and Palestinian children study together, play together, and speak both Hebrew and Arabic. We stood around the playground watching the children enjoying themselves. It was a deeply moving sight, the only place where we had seen children from both sides living and playing together in peace.

Neve Shalom is a model of reconciliation for the Middle East. It shows that Israelis and Palestinians can live together in peace, respect one another, share their resources, and raise a new generation in peace.

May the God of peace bless this oasis of peace and make many more of them.

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One morning toward the end of our stay in Hebron, we gathered in the park across from the Tomb of the Patriarchs for an interfaith prayer service. We read from the psalms, sang hymns for three different faiths, and offered prayers for peace. As we prayed, Israeli soldiers stood just a few feet away, laughing at us.

Just then, a bus pulled up in front of the Tomb of the Patriarchs. A rabbi dressed in black stepped off. He carried a machine gun at his side. He looked around, swung his gun in all directions, and then used it to wave the children off the bus. With his machine gun held high, he led the children into the synagogue for morning Torah study. I have never seen anything like it in my life. A rabbi with a machine gun leading children to morning scripture study. What a complete lack of understanding about shalom! There will never be peace as long as religious leaders carry weapons, practice violence, support revenge, wage war and worship the false gods of violence. We all have to turn back to the God of peace, the God of shalom and salaam.

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On our last day, we visited different Palestinian families who lost their homes to Israeli settlers. I met a forty year old woman, the mother of nine sons and three daughters, whose husband was sick. They lost all their possessions. The Israelis have tried repeatedly to demolish her home. I walked a mile through the countryside with her, listening to her story, her fears, her hopes. She offered us tea and we played with her kids.

Her heart-breaking tragedy is unfortunately a typical Palestinian story of Israeli injustice. But I kept thinking that none of this oppression and injustice would be possible without the \$10 million a day in military aid from the United States and Israel's constant protection in the United Nations even though it deliberately violates international law.

I spent my last night in Hebron in a shelter with Atta Jaber and his family. He told me the terrifying details of the demolition of his home by 140 Israeli soldiers. I met his friends who came by to visit and stayed up playing with his children.

On our last day, our whole delegation drove out to the Hebron countryside to see the ruins of Atta's demolished house. There, under a tent, his family and friends celebrated our visit with Maq Lube, the traditional Arab feast of rice, chicken, vegetables, and spices, cooked in one great pot all day over an open fire. Twenty of us enjoyed the feast sitting under the tent in the Palestinian countryside. Their hospitality and kindness to us, in the midst of their poverty and suffering, was overwhelming and touching. Though our country funds the injustice inflicted on them, they showed us nothing but love.

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We left Palestine greatly disturbed by the stories of suffering, injustice, pain and oppression we heard. Every day, we learned more about ethnic cleansing, apartheid, military occupation, oppression, U.S. military aid, and the Israeli suppression of basic human rights. This Israeli violence is considered perfectly legal. It is committed in the name of the God. It is maintained in the name of democracy. It is enforced in the name of history and destiny.

What is the solution? In the 1940s, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that the only way to solve any international crisis, including the Israeli-Palestinian question, is through nonviolence. He said both sides need to adopt nonviolence and commit themselves to respect basic human rights. Gandhi's analysis means Israel must immediately stop all land confiscation; stop all housing demolitions; and stop its military occupation of Palestine. Israel must share all water, land and resources with the Palestinians, welcome back all refugees, release all prisoners, and grant complete freedom to all people regardless of religion or race, including the freedom of travel.

Gandhi would also insist that the United States stop all military aid to Israel immediately, as well as all military aid to the entire Middle East. It must stop supporting, funding, and legitimizing the Israeli occupation, and pursue nonviolent resolutions to the crises.

People of faith on both sides can find an answer not in violence, but in the biblical wisdom of nonviolence. If they could place their trust in the God of Shalom and Salaam, the living God of peace, they would learn to accept their neighbors and begin to live in peace.

As I left the region, I felt that people of faith and conscience in North America need to stand in solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians, support all voices of nonviolence, and resist our own country's support of the occupation. In particular, we need to lobby and organize against U.S. military aid to Israel, and perhaps even call a boycott against all tourism to Israel and the Holy Land sights as long as the occupation continues.

At the Tel Aviv airport, as we waited to board our flight back home, my friends and I were questioned by Israeli security officials. In particular, I was taken aside and interrogated for over two hours. I found it a grueling, even frightening experience, because I did not know what was going to happen. Later, on further reflection, I felt grateful for the experience. For a brief moment, I felt what life what like for a Palestinian suffering under the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation.

The Israeli oppression of the Palestinians is a tragedy that we can no longer ignore. Each one of us must take a stand against U.S. military aid to Israel on behalf of the suffering Palestinians. If we want a future of peace, then we must pursue a nonviolent solution to the crisis that tears apart our sisters and brothers in the Middle East.

A future of peace is possible. Neve Shalom offers hope to us all. But each one of us must help the oasis of peace flourish. Otherwise, we will all die in the desert of war.