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## **An Opportunity for Holy Land Peace**

### **Middle East conference studies the prospect of peace in Israel and Palestine**

By Bishop Allen Bartlett

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The Chinese character for "crisis" is said to be a combination of two characters: "danger" and "opportunity." Any crisis has both possibilities.

On March 3-4, as the perplexed world, sensing a crisis, watched Hamas come to power in Palestine and Israel prepare for elections, more than 250 people from the Washington area and beyond participated in a Middle East conference. It was entitled "Pursue Justice, Seek Peace: Working together to build a better future in Palestine and Israel."

My wife Jerrie and I were there, and we found the mood more one of opportunity than danger. We heard a broad array of speakers and workshop leaders, Christian and Jewish, from Jerusalem and the United States at the conference, held at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. The conference was sponsored by Friends of Sabeel - North America and the Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace, a group with origins in the Diocese of Washington but now independent.

Jean Zaru, presiding clerk of the Ramallah Quakers, told us that representatives of Hamas had recently visited churches after Sunday services, to say, "We are brothers and sisters with you seeking justice and relief from oppression." She pointed out that Hamas cares about those in need, is not corrupt, and includes women. "Their statements so far do not worry me," she said.

Jeff Halper, an Israeli Jew who directs the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions, said the conflict is emblematic for the Muslim world, the U.S. and global community, the Jewish community, and as a battleground for human rights and international law. Because Israel has changed facts on the ground, he no longer believes a two-state solution is possible. Long-term, Halper envisioned a future regional confederation of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

The Rev. Naim Ateek, director of Sabeel, an ecumenical theology center in Jerusalem and "Voice of the Palestinian Christians," said Sabeel remains committed to the two-state solution "for the sake of the Jewish people," for whom a Jewish state is crucial. He is an Anglican priest of the Diocese of Jerusalem, and is an Arab Palestinian citizen of the state of Israel.

In his address Afif Safieh, a Christian who is the new Palestinian diplomatic representative to the U.S., spoke vigorously on the strong role civil society can and must play in peacemaking. Like

many others, he affirmed that substantial majorities in both Palestine and Israel want a peaceful, two-state solution. The challenge is how to do that with Palestinian areas cut up into cantons by Israeli settlements and their Israeli-only access roads, checkpoints, the Wall, and Gaza with no seaport, airport, or border crossings.

The issue of divestment from corporations profiting from the occupation was frequently mentioned as a possible strategy. I was one of six church representatives presenting the varied stances of our respective denominations. The Episcopal Church has chosen to follow two tracks: corporate engagement (dialogue with and challenge to such corporations, and stockholder resolutions) and positive investment (encouraging investment in Palestinian infrastructure).

Liat Weingart of Jewish Voice for Peace spoke of the "lonely, embattled position" of progressive Jews (who do not represent mainstream Judaism). She said Christians seeking dialogue with Jews may encounter "a traumatized response," but she said Jews want to be engaged. She urged, "Stay in the conversation!" Many of us also were quite moved by the last plenary address by Sara Roy of Harvard University, who told her own story as a child of Holocaust survivors.

Among the other speakers and workshop leaders were Don Wagner, Presbyterian and co-founder of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, Professor Susan Akram of Boston University, an Israel Defense Force Major who had refused service in Palestine, and Christian Peacemaker Team, International Solidarity Movement, and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program participants from Palestine.

The Episcopal Church has for many years supported a just peace that guarantees Israel's security and Palestinian aspirations for a viable sovereign state with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both Israel and Palestine. As positions have hardened, the church in the past 10 years has condemned the violence of suicide bombers and the occupation, road blocks, settlement construction, demolition of homes, and the "security wall."

This conference offered a rich fare of examples of persons working toward justice and peace under terribly difficult circumstances. Hamas has maintained a tenuous cease-fire for a year, but Palestinians continue to die almost daily. No one has renounced violence.

Doleful possible scenarios abound. The hope running through the conference was that the U.S. and other nations will not make premature decisions rooted in fear of danger, shutting off short and long term actions to help, but rather allow both sides to find their way forward. Meanwhile, groups and individuals such as were represented in this conference will fan the guttering coals of hope that this may be a moment of opportunity.

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