

# ***Sabeel Conference Brings Renowned Peacemakers To Atlanta***

by Warren Goodwin (Atlanta.Indymedia.org)

On Friday and Saturday, February 4th and 5th, the Friends of Sabeel, North America held an interfaith conference at Colombia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga. The conference, entitled "Working for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel: In Word and Deed", featured renowned religious leaders, theologians, and peacemakers, and included presenters from Israel, the West Bank, and from around the United States.

The four keynote addresses were given by Reverend Cannon Naim Ateek, a Palestinian Anglican priest and founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation theology Center in Jerusalem; Dr. Jeff Halper, a Jewish-Israeli activist and professor of anthropology at Ben Gurion University in Jerusalem; Dr. Mark Ellis, director of the Center for American and Jewish studies at Baylor University; and Mubarak Awad, founder and president of Nonviolence International, and founder of the Palestinian Center for the study of Nonviolence. In addition to these speeches, numerous workshops were held.

## **Dr Awad's Keynote:**

Dr. Mubarak Awad, a Palestinian Christian, was raised by his mother after his father was killed by an Israeli soldier in June of 1948. After receiving his PHD in America, he returned to Israel to train Palestinians in the techniques of nonviolent resistance, and was doing so in 1988 when he was deported as a security threat. In his talk, Dr. Awad described his research into the history of the use of nonviolence by Palestinians, Muslims, and Arabs, and he described some of the methods he and his groups had utilized before being deported. These included presenting Israelis living in Palestinian homes with roses, and replanting olive trees alongside Israeli peaceniks, trees that had been uprooted by Israeli soldiers.

Dr. Awad took a number of bold positions in his talk, noting that he supports a two state solution, in which the settlers could stay (like Arabs within Israel) and that nonviolence means opposing the PLO and the armed struggle it represents. Awad's most striking point, however, was his assertion that the Palestinians are under occupation because "occupation is our choice," because they are not choosing to use enough active nonviolent resistance, on a "daily, weekly, and monthly basis". Palestinians must "be strong enough to burn the refugee camps and march to their homes in Palestine [...]"

Also interesting was his urging the United States to disengage from the situation, because it never treats the two parties equally; it backs Israel "100 out of 100 times," as he put it. Without US interference the two parties would have already made peace; during his talk, and again in a later panel discussion, Awad mentioned and held up as an example of this the city of Haifa, in Israel, where a mixed population of Jews and Arabs live together harmoniously.

Awad noted some of the small-scale successes of nonviolent resistance, as when he helped organize a village to dismantle a fence and reclaim land from a settlement; they were shot at, but after hours of stand-off the claims of the village were accepted by the military governor.

"We are not going to give up... regardless of beatings, shootings, or the wall [...] We are not going to kneel and will continue to reject unjust solutions like Camp David," he pronounced. "We do this not because we hate or because we like confronting a powerful enemy; we are like salmon -- we were born there and life will take us back," he concluded.

### **Panel Discussion:**

The closing panel discussion Saturday evening outlined a number of ways for American peace activists to move forward. Many of these were familiar; public education, lobbying, and media advocacy figured prominently, as did supporting the growing divestment and economic sanctions campaigns.

Josh Ruebner, the Grassroots Advocacy Coordinator of the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, joked that "Although I'm Jewish, I think that we've gotta start getting evangelical -- talking about the situation to people who may not want to hear about it." Ellen O'Grady, an artist who has spent years in the West Bank, concurred; "We've got to tell the stories that are not being told, using the tools at our disposal."

The overall urgency of the issue was brought home by Dr. Ellis, who compared the situation of the Palestinians to that of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, awaiting annihilation. In conclusion, Jeff Halper reminded the assembly that "There are millions of people -- Palestinians and Israelis -- who are dependent upon us."

## **A Reframing of the Conflict**

Jeff Halper Speaks in Atlanta, Launches New Peace Group

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On Tuesday February 1, Professor Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions spoke to Atlantans about his work with ICAHD and shared his analysis of the Israeli Occupation. The educational event also helped to launch a new American branch of the peace group: ICAHD-USA.

Halper, aged 58, was born Minnesota and emigrated from America to Israel 31 years ago. He began his talk by describing the history of ICAHD; it was created by a coalition of people from Rabbis for Human Rights, Bat Shalom, the Committee Against Torture in Israel, and the Jerusalem branch of Peace Now, in 1997 as the peace process began to collapse during the right-wing Netanyahu administration.

Halper described how the Occupation got stronger during the period of the Oslo peace process, noting that "After seven years of the peace process, from 1993-2000, the number of [Israeli] settlers in occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza strip had doubled, from 200,000 to 450,000," and how life for the Palestinians in these areas declined during this period.

Like Americans, most Israeli citizens are ignorant of the realities and suffering of life under military occupation. His group works to focus attention on the trauma and destitution caused by home demolitions; by doing so, the abstract concept of "occupation" is made concrete and understandable. "House demolition is a microcosm of the Occupation," he said. According to Halper, "Home demolition has nothing to do with security," because "95% of the homes destroyed have no connection to terrorism." They are destroyed simply because they were built without permits (which are not granted to Palestinians), or are destroyed as part of military operations (as in Gaza recently), or as collective punishment.

ICAHD estimates that since 1967, 12,000 Palestinian homes have been leveled by the Israeli armed forces and private subcontractors. Recently created is a new "Demolition Administration" that has targeted for destruction 20-40,000 more homes within Israel, including many belonging to Bedouin families.

To Halper, the destruction of Palestinian homes and growth of the illegal settlements is part of an overall Israeli strategy to "create facts on the ground". Halper succinctly describes the Occupation as "a pro-active policy to control the whole country and displace the Palestinians [...] Israel did \*not\* build two hundred settlements and super-highways in the West Bank for security -- even the wall, ultimately, is not about security."

ICHAD volunteers use nonviolent direct action to try to prevent Palestinian homes from being destroyed by the Israeli government. "We use our privileged positions, as Israeli Jews, to resist in ways that if the Palestinians did, they would be shot". Although these efforts are generally unsuccessful in stopping the demolitions, by blocking bulldozers and chaining themselves inside houses slated for demolition, they make the process so arduous for the government that fewer homes are destroyed; "...one or two homes might be destroyed that day, instead of 9 or 10," he said. Once the home is destroyed, the group fundraises to help the Palestinian families rebuild, a "political, not humanitarian act".

The crux of Halper's talk was about the urgent necessity of reframing our perspectives on the conflict, from the "Israeli Frame" which now dominates the public discourse and debate to a "Peace Frame" that would allow root causes of the conflict to be addressed and would facilitate a just peace and coexistence. The essential issue, to Halper is, "How can we change Israel to acknowledge the existence, rights, and claims of the Palestinian people, and re-gear it towards sharing the country?"

The "Israeli Frame" is based around the idea that -this is a win/lose situation, either we win or they win -there is no occupation; Israeli actions are only motivated by security concerns. The problem is terrorism.

The "Peace Frame"-

-It is not a win/lose situation; a just peace means both peoples win.

-Notes that Israel is \*not\* involved in an existential struggle; it is a nuclear power, has one of the largest standing armies in the world, is a leading arms manufacturer, and has an economy "larger than Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan, combined".

-there are two peoples here, each with rights to self-determination

-terrorism is a symptom of the occupation.

-peacemakers from both communities are on the same side, opposing exclusivity and domination.

This reframing of the debate is imperative because conclusions follow from the way an issue is framed, and as long as peace advocates are simply rebutting Israeli contentions from within the Israeli framework they will not be successful. Right now, Israel has "power with no responsibility", because "as a victim it has unlimited license". When viewed through the new perspective of the Peace Frame, it becomes possible to hold Israel accountable, because it is no longer the victim.

"Human Rights is an integral part of the modern Jewish experience," and Halper is outraged that more Jews are not holding the government of Israel accountable on these issues.

Halper believes that "[Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon is headed towards a two state solution," but that the fragmented Palestinian "mini-state" that is being created is one where Israel controls the borders, the economy, Jerusalem, the rivers, the aquifers, the airspace, and even the communications sphere and the electromagnetic spectrum. Instead of this manifestly unjust outcome, which will prolong the violence and be substantively equivalent to the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa, Halper suggested a number of real solutions to the conflict; there could be 1 state with equal rights for all; two viable real states; or perhaps a confederation. The important thing is that the solution must be based on human rights and justice.

The event was sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee Middle East Peace Education Program and by Unitarian Universalists for Justice in the Middle east

On Thursday, Halper will be participating in an interfaith delegation to the Israeli Consulate in Atlanta and this weekend he will be a keynote speaker at the Friends of Sabeel peacemakers conference at the Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur.

