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“Conference on American Churches and the Palestinian Meets in Austin, Texas”

by Rev. David Oliver-Holder

AUSTIN – Naim Ateek was an eleven-year-old Palestinian Christian boy on May 12, 1948. That was the day Jewish Zionist troops, the Haganah, occupied his town of Beisan, 20 miles south of the Sea of Galilee. Two weeks later, on May 26, Naim’s father and other leading men in the town were told that they had only hours to either evacuate the town or be killed. The family lost everything, their home, their land and their livelihood.

Today, he is known as the Rev. Naim Ateek, and he serves as the Canon of St. George’s Cathedral (Anglican) in Jerusalem, and is the founder and director of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center. Rev. Ateek delivered a plenary address at “To Loose the Chains of Injustice – Isaiah 58:6 - American Churches and the Palestinians,” a conference held February 11th and 12th on the campus of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Presented by Friends of Sabeel – North America, the Roman Catholic peacemaking group Pax Christi USA, and the Austin-based Interfaith Community for Palestinian Rights, the conference attracted more than 220 people from all over the United States, who were inspired by Rev. Ateek’s proclamation on Friday evening.

Far from harboring any hate toward the Jewish Zionists who violated his and his family’s human rights, Rev. Ateek seeks only justice. “We are not against Jews,” he said. “We are against the wrongs of the State of Israel.”

Rights Violations

The systematic violation of Palestinian human rights by the Haganah and the State of Israel sounded as one refrain throughout the two days of the conference. Rev. Ateek’s town of Beisan was only one of dozens that were “cleansed.” Beisan added 6,000 refugees to the United Nations estimate of more than 770,000 total refugees created in 1948. While the State of Israel has just approved \$870 million for Israeli settlers in Gaza to compensate them for evacuating their settlements (which were illegal in the first place), Palestinians understand that they will likely never be compensated for the confiscation of their homes and lands, confiscations which have violated international law since they began 1948.

The State of Israel continues to violate the property rights of Palestinians, as well as flout international law, through the demolition of Palestinian homes. Early Friday afternoon, during the first panel discussion, the fact that most Americans seem to assume that all Palestinians are terrorists was discussed. Asked about the three things Americans most need to know, Rev. Wendy Mathewson, Associate Pastor of Northminster Presbyterian Church, in Evanston, Illinois, and who formerly worked in the Middle East Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA), answered, “Americans need to unlearn that all Palestinians are terrorists.”

Stav Adivi made a power point presentation during lunch on Saturday. Adivi, an officer in the Israeli Defense Forces, and a member of the Israeli Committee Against House demolitions, exposed another widespread American assumption, namely, that the Palestinian homes that are demolished belong to suicide bombers, their families, or to those who harbor them. “Ninety-five percent of the homes that are demolished,” Adivi said, “belong to Palestinians who have no connection to terrorism.” Many of these families are guilty only of having built their homes without an Israeli permit to build. “But what are they to do?” Adivi asked. “Israel does not give building permits to Palestinians.”

Still another way in which the rights of Palestinians are systematically violated is through the structures of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. David Robinson, national coordinator of Pax Christi USA and executive editor of *The Catholic Peace Voice*, stressed Friday afternoon that Americans need to understand that Palestinians live occupied lives. “We have no idea,” he charged, “how every aspect of their lives is controlled by the reality of the occupation.”

Asked why it is so important that Americans become aware of the violation of Palestinian human rights, Robinson compared the conflict in Palestine to the conflict in Darfur, Sudan. “As bad as Darfur is,” Robinson said Friday afternoon, “American policy did not drive that situation. In Palestine, our foreign policy is driving events there.” Rev. Mathewson agreed with Robinson, adding that the Palestinian experience of American mission has changed. “Where we used to send missionaries,” she said, “now the Palestinians experience weapons, weapons with ‘Made in the U.S.A’ on the labels.”

Workshops on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning covered issues such as the nascent divestment campaign, manifest most recently in the selective divestment action taken at last summer’s General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Those attending the conference from other denominations were quick to praise the Presbyterians for leading the way in pursuing divestment. Other workshops explored the connections between Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Washington, the history of the Palestinian conflict, myths of the Middle East conflict, the silence of the American churches with respect to conflict, and the manner in which the U.S. media reports the conflict.

Ann Hafften, the coordinator for Middle East Networking for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, offered a workshop on alternative travel to the Holy Land. She noted that the Ministry of Tourism of the State of Israel is a cabinet-level ministry of the Israeli government. During his plenary presentation, Rev. Dr. Donald Wagner, the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at North Park University in Chicago, repeated this fact, and added that this “says something about the importance the State of Israel places on controlling the way tourists experience the Holy Land.” Hafften lamented that “so many American Christians travel to the Holy Land, the birth-place of the Church, and never meet any of the local Christians.” Rev. Mathewson said that one thing American Christians need to do is “go and see.” American should see the Holy Land, but by way of the local Palestinian Christians who operate their own tourism businesses.

Persistent Hope

Still, hope remains that a lasting peace can be realized and that the occupation will end. Asked on Friday afternoon how he maintains his hope, Rev. Richard Toll, chair of the Friends of Sabeel North America and rector of St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church in Milwaukee, Oregon, pointed to the Palestinians who are committed to staying in Palestine. "They give me a sense of hope."

David Robinson spoke of all of the friendships and connections he has made with those suffering under the occupation. "We find hope in the relationships." That kind of hope imbued the conference. You could hear it in the different languages being spoken, Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish and English. You could see it in the arts and craft items for sale in one of the classrooms. You could smell it and taste it in the excellent tabboulé, hummus and baklava served with Friday's banquet dinner. You could feel it in the emotion and laughter shared at Friday's banquet. Near the end of an impromptu flute performance of a Palestinian song, the sizable contingent of Palestinians, who now live in Houston, began to sing in Arabic. They were overjoyed by the large show of support offered by the conference.

Hope shone in the testimony of Craig and Cindy Corrie, who spoke Friday evening of their daughter Rachel's courageous work as a part of the International Solidarity Movement. On March 16, 2003, an Israeli Defense Forces D-9 Caterpillar bulldozer crushed Rachel in the Gaza city of Rafah as she tried to stop it from destroying the home of a Palestinian doctor and his family. Cindy Corrie said that for them to find peace following Rachel's death, "it was necessary for us to come to this land and walk where Rachel walked, and see what she saw." They did, and they now embody Rachel's conviction about the occupation that "this has to stop."

Hope was even found in the most unlikely of places. Rev. Ateek, during his address on Friday evening, quoted two passages from President Bush's Second Inaugural speech. President Bush said, "In the long run, there is no justice without freedom, and there can be no human rights without human liberty...All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for liberty, we will stand with you." Rev. Ateek paused and smiled, knowing that Bush likely did not have the Palestinians in mind when he said those words. He looked out over the room and said, "Those words sound good to me," and he projected the hope of the prophet Isaiah who wrote that if the Word is sent out, it will not return void.

David Robinson said he kept returning to the words of Vaclav Havel. Havel wrote, "Hope isn't optimism. Real hope is that sense that you are working toward what is right, regardless of what may come from it." It is this hope which sustains Palestinian resistance to Zionist ideology, an ideology which Rev. Ateek said, "refuses to see the Palestinians as partners in the land."