

The Palestinian story: An interview with Naim Ateek

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Naim Stifan Ateek, who recently retired after 13 years as canon of St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, is the author of Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation. He is the director of the Sabeel Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, an educational institution which aims to strengthen the faith of Palestinian Christians and to share the life and witness of the Palestinian Christian community with those outside the region. The Sabeel Center's third international conference, held recently in Bethlehem, focused on the theme "The Challenge of Jubilee: What Does God Require?" According to Ateek, the conference's topic raises "the possibility for a new beginning between Palestinians and Israelis." We spoke with Canon Ateek after the conference.

Only a few weeks ago Israeli citizens were lining up to get gas masks, and the U.S. was poised to go to war again in the Middle East. While the UN's intervention has calmed the waters at least momentarily, the U.S. is still in a standoff with Iraq. How does the situation look to a Palestinian?

Almost all Palestinians feel that a U.S. strike at Iraq would be a grave mistake. Though most of us have no sympathy for Saddam Hussein, we have full sympathy for the Iraqi people, and we know that it is the Iraqi people who would suffer. Why should they be punished for what Saddam Hussein is doing?

The disproportion in the way the U.S. treats Iraq, on the one hand, and Israel on the other, is also not lost on Palestinians. Palestinians say that the U.S. uses two different standards of morality. One applies to Israel, the other to the rest of the world. The U.S. must use the same standard of morality. Iraq is not complying with the United Nations' resolutions, but neither is Israel. And while Israel has gotten away with it for a long time, the U.S. marshals massive force against Iraq. From a faith perspective, God demands a single morality in the way we treat each other.

You say that Palestinians do not on the whole support Saddam Hussein. How then do you account for the demonstrations in favor of Saddam in Palestinian-held territory?

Some people do support Saddam Hussein. However, a recent poll by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center shows that only 3.8 percent of Palestinians in Gaza and 4.8 percent in the West Bank support him, whereas 94.1 percent of Palestinians sympathize with the Iraqi people. The majority of Palestinians support the people of Iraq and not Saddam. But because people are so frustrated with the West, especially the U.S.'s Middle East policy, some people will lift up Saddam Hussein to show their frustration and anger with that policy. When Palestinians express support for Iraq, part of it has become an issue of dignity--the dignity of Arabs, the dignity of Islam, the dignity of people who are proud of their heritage but who now feel that the U.S. is rubbing their noses into the dust

I should also mention that a wide cultural gap separates the U.S. and the Arab world and inhibits a peaceful resolution to the conflict with Iraq. There are cultural ways--specific to the Middle East--to negotiate with Iraq to gain its compliance with UN resolutions. You cannot, for example, put Iraq in a corner and expect compliance. It is part of Middle East culture that if you keep pushing people in this way, they will fight back, even if it means their own destruction. Such a stance is connected with Iraq's sense of dignity. You can't put your foot on people's necks and expect them to crumble. Those of us who are people of faith don't believe that conflict should be resolved with arms. But that applies to the U.S. as well as to Saddam Hussein.

On the subject of Middle East policy and negotiating tactics, how do you as a Palestinian Christian respond when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu goes to the U.S. and meets with evangelical Christians who give unqualified support to Israel's policies?

I was disappointed but not surprised when I heard about Netanyahu's strategy. The meeting makes it transparently clear that the justification for Zionism and for Zionist claims is now inseparably tied to a literalist view of the Bible. In my estimation fundamentalist Zionism is a third historical phase or dimension of Zionism. The state of Israel was founded by secular Zionists. An articulate form of religious Zionism became popular especially after 1967. Both secular and religious Zionism persist, but they have been overtaken, and to a degree unmasked, by fundamentalist Zionism. At its heart Zionism--in all its versions--constitutes a claim about the

relationship between the Jewish people and the land. Fundamentalist Zionism is simply the most unambiguous and open statement of this claim.

When Netanyahu embraces Jerry Falwell it means that Israel now grounds its legitimacy and self-identity in Jewish fundamentalism. It's natural, then, for Netanyahu to turn to fundamentalist Christians to help back Israel's claim over the whole of the land. The legitimacy being sought is not moral. It is tied to a fundamentalist view of what scripture says. Ironically, Netanyahu cannot get from the Knesset in his own country the kind of support he gets from fundamentalist Christians in the U.S. Some secular and religious Zionists are uncomfortable with Netanyahu's blunt style.

Do you find it ironic that this group of U.S. Christians seems to give little thought to Christians in the Middle East?

Many people don't even know that there are Christians in the Middle East. When people think of the Middle East they think of Muslims. When they think of Israel they think of Jews. It doesn't seem to enter many people's minds that there are Christians here. Part of the work of the Sabeel Center is to introduce our friends abroad to the life and vitality of the 14 million Middle East Christians--a significant group of people. In fact, there are as many Christians in the Middle East as there are Jews throughout the world. According to Jewish statistics, Jews number 14 or 15 million. But most people don't see Middle East Christians because they live in the midst of 150-200 million Muslims. Part of the work of Sabeel is to make these Christians visible.

You mention the fact that in the Middle East Christians live in the middle of a large number of Muslims. You are no doubt aware that the same Christians with whom Netanyahu met seek to defend you against persecution from these Muslims. They claim that Christians in the Middle East are being persecuted by Muslims. Can you respond to this claim?

The word persecution cannot in any way be used to describe the incidents that occur between Christians and Muslims, at least in Israel and Palestine. Conflicts exist wherever there are peoples of different ethnic backgrounds, or in this case faiths, living in the same area. These are compounded when the external pressures put on both parties are to the extremes that we all feel in this country. There is no "persecution" of Christians or Muslims except by the Israelis. Christians and Muslims stand side by side in the fight against injustice and their struggle for a Palestinian

state.

From the perspective of Palestinian Christians, occasional incidents of conflict are being hyped as a way of diverting people's attention from the real causes of conflict here. The real barrier to peace is the extremist Israeli government. But the Israeli government, together with these fundamentalist Christians, has been successful in deflecting attention from its unjust policies by claiming that Islam is the enemy. For Palestinian Christians, the Israeli government is the oppressor, not Islam. Palestinian Christians have lived with Islam for 1,400 years.

I am not implying that the relationship between Christians and Muslims has always been ideal. But unfortunately, especially today, relationships between religious and ethnic minorities in various parts of the world frequently fluctuate between better and worse.

We still have quite a bit of work to do in terms of religious tolerance and understanding. Christianity's relationship with Judaism, Islam and other religions--even Christians' relations among themselves--is not ideal. But, at least here in Palestine, Christians have learned to live very well with Islam, and when you look at what the Qur'an says about Christ, and about the People of the Book, you find a great respect for Christians. So we do not find that our basic problem is with Islam. Our basic problem comes from Israel's political injustice toward all Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim.

This year marks Israel's 50th anniversary--its jubilee. How does Israel's 50th anniversary look from the perspective of Palestinians?

The narrative Israel tells of itself on its 50th anniversary suppresses, distorts and essentially tries to destroy the Palestinians' narrative of their own history. The history of Zionism has demonstrated that in order for an Israeli narrative to continue in Palestine, the Palestinians' narrative must end. If there is to be an Israel, there can't be a Palestine. Some Israeli leaders have been very outspoken on this point. So when Israel begins its celebration of its admittedly impressive achievements, Palestinians remember their catastrophe--what we call in Arabic, al-nakbah.

Al-nakbah refers to Palestinians' loss of the land in 1948. Within a very short time--a few months--three quarters of a million Palestinians were displaced from their homes, and three quarters of the land of Palestine was conquered. Some fled, many were forced out of their homes at gunpoint. Over 400 Palestinian villages and towns

were depopulated, and Palestinians were forcibly removed from over 650 other localities. Palestinians were displaced from over 1,200 locations in Palestine. The children of the children of these refugees still live in horrible conditions in camps in Gaza and elsewhere. This is the al-nakbah.

All this happened at a time when Palestinians were finally able to hope that they might achieve independence from the British mandate--that they might achieve a state in which Jews, Christians and Muslims could live together. Instead, 77 percent of their land was taken away from them, and it became an exclusively Jewish state. So the dream for independence and a religiously pluralistic state was shattered. And no one was able to do anything about it. UN resolutions that called for the return of refugees to their homes went unheeded. The Zionists were single-minded and very strong.

Over the years we Palestinians have been telling our story, but it has always been negated. Only now, and especially as a result of work being done by Israeli revisionist historians, are people beginning to accept the truth of the Palestinian narrative--the truth that Palestinians were here on the land in 1948 and long before; that we did not voluntarily leave the land but were forced out, often brutally, by the Zionists; that our rights were crushed.

The theme of jubilee has become very important to your theology. What are some of its implications concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Leviticus 25 talks about the social observance every 50 years of a jubilee year in which indentured slaves are set free and land is returned to its original owners. It is a biblical idea based on God's demand for justice. A jubilee year is necessary because people are inclined toward evil, to exploit each other. Therefore it is possible that at the end of a 50-year period injustice will have accumulated to such an extent that society will be in a horrible state. With the year of jubilee God in effect steps in as if to say, "Stop the injustice."

From what scholars tell us, most of the stipulations of jubilee probably were never implemented in ancient Israel. But it still stands as an ideal that God demands. From a Christian perspective, God in Christ demands of us a perpetual jubilee. As Christians we have to live a day-to-day jubilee. The Lord's Prayer reflects such an orientation when it says "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Christ is suggesting something very close to a perpetual jubilee. Some scholars now argue--

based on certain Gospel passages--that Jesus' message was greatly influenced by jubilee themes. Whether or not that was so, even if we look at the concept of jubilee strictly from an Old Testament perspective, we can see clearly that at the end of a 50-year period God's demand is for things to be set right. Things that have gone wrong need now to be addressed. Land should return to its original legal owners; the debts of the poor must be forgiven; the prisoner must be released; the oppressed must be free.

The concept of jubilee applies to our situation, and Palestinian Christians and others should challenge the state of Israel to look squarely at the implications of jubilee. To proclaim jubilee is not anti-Israel. If jubilee is taken seriously and implemented in some measure, it will give security to the state of Israel and it will give justice to the Palestinians.

After 50 years Palestinians are not asking for the destruction of Israel. Palestinians have become very realistic about their vision for a just peace. We are not saying that we need to go back to Jaffa and Haifa or all of Palestine. We will come to reasonable terms on the question of land. We are saying we need our own state on the West Bank and in Gaza, including East Jerusalem.

Of course, I must admit that as we say this, many of us still harbor a thin hope that the ideal solution could be effected at some point--the idea being one democratic secular state of Palestine that everyone can share in and be a part of. But because most Palestinians now respect the need for Jews to have a Jewish state, we say, OK, let us have our own little state alongside the state of Israel.

In the U.S. and elsewhere, support for Israel is deeply tied to what Jews suffered in the Holocaust. For that same reason, criticism of the state of Israel is difficult to dissociate from that identification. How do you as a Palestinian deal with the intimate connection between the state of Israel and the Holocaust?

No sane person would deny that what Jews suffered in the Holocaust was unspeakably horrible and should never be repeated. We Palestinians have no problem in condemning the Jewish Holocaust. But although we condemn what happened, we don't believe as Christians that the Holocaust justifies what Israel has done to the Palestinians. Because a person suffers, even horribly, that suffering does not give that person the right to inflict suffering on others.

Recently some visitors from the U.S. told me that during a trip to Gaza they had met in a field a few young American Jews who reside in a nearby Jewish settlement. In that field, which was owned by a Palestinian, settlers had uprooted olive trees that Palestinians had planted only a week before. The American visitors asked the settlers why the trees had been destroyed. "The land belongs to us," a settler said. "It is owed to us. The whole world owes us," he said. I don't think this attitude is right. Because I have suffered I am not justified in inflicting suffering on others. There is something sick about this way of thinking.

Palestinians don't feel that the events of the Holocaust, something that happened in Europe and in which Palestinians played no role, should allow the world to gloss over what Israel is doing to Palestinians. Jews, quite properly, have been very aggressive in claiming compensation for the Holocaust and in gaining admissions of guilt for what happened during the Nazi era. Does this give the Jews the right to persecute Palestinians in retaliation for Nazi atrocities? Is Israel willing to acknowledge its own wrongs against the Palestinians? The Jewish theologian Marc Ellis has commented that often people who have suffered believe that, because of their innocence, they can do whatever they want. This is not right.

Would you admit that this same logic applies to Palestinians? That because they have been victimized by Jews, they are not thereby justified in committing acts of terrorism--an issue about which Israel has a legitimate concern.

When we talk about terrorism we must make sure that we are not talking only about Palestinians. Israel has waged a war of terror against Palestinians throughout its 50-year history--a systematic and ongoing war. Israel commits terrorist acts under the guise of "security." When Palestinians hit back it is called terrorism. Violence--terror--should not be condoned on either side, whether it is a suicide bomb attack by a Palestinian or the more subtle terror by the Israelis.

Without getting sidetracked in a discussion of the meaning of terror, I will say this: The Palestinians have resisted and hit back at the people who are causing their suffering, unlike the Jewish people who inflict pain and suffering on the Palestinians who were not the cause of their suffering. The Palestinian people waited for UN resolutions in their favor to be implemented. When the whole world ignored these resolutions, some groups resorted to violence out of despair and frustration. I think such acts of violence are wrong.

I have always encouraged our people to speak out and resist oppression, but only through nonviolent means. This has always been my personal policy and the policy of Sabeel. I strongly believe that nonviolent resistance is more effective in bringing about a more sustainable and just solution. In all our activities at Sabeel we stress nonviolent resistance.

And that brings me back to the idea of jubilee. During a jubilee people can say, "I'm sorry, I've done you wrong." The world has told the Jews that they have been wronged, and the world has gone out of its way to help the Jews--to help them settle here in Palestine if they want to, to support the state of Israel to the extent that it has been able to develop phenomenally over the past 50 years. I hope that now in the year of its 50th anniversary some people in Israel will ask, What has Israel done to the Palestinians?

The Oslo negotiations culminated in 1993 with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat shaking hands on the White House lawn. It seemed to many people that the outlines for Palestinian self-rule were in place. But can there be a viable Palestinian state, given what Israel has established on the ground, including settlements, security zones, and highways that cut through the West Bank, bypassing Palestinian towns and cities and connecting Israeli settlements?

A viable Palestinian state will become possible only when Israel becomes conscious of its injustice. If Israel continues to act on the premise that all the land belongs to it and keeps grabbing more land from Palestinians, creating more settlements and expanding the existing settlements, then, of course, there will not be a viable Palestinian state. And there will never be peace. Israel has to make a choice.

Recently Shimon Peres, the former leader of Israel's Labor Party, said that there must be a Palestinian state; otherwise we won't have peace. Maybe it took the presence of an extreme right-wing government to help Peres see that the road the government of Israel is following does not lead to peace. It is possible to have a viable Palestinian state if Israel says, "We have to share the land with the Palestinians."

My own solution to Israel's facts on the ground, as you call them, has always been that the settlements can be part of the compensation package that Israel must negotiate with Palestinians. The settlements can be the new towns and villages that

will help house Palestinian refugees. After all, the land on which the settlements have been built was taken from Palestinians. Palestinian laborers built the settlements. And the money for them has come largely from outside, mainly from the U.S. The possibility of a viable Palestinian state could be quite real were Israel to change its attitude toward the conflict and acknowledge itself as at least partially responsible for what has happened.

What about Oslo? Are there inherent impediments to peace in what many saw as an instrument to peace in the Oslo agreements? Some Palestinians argue that, under the language of self-rule, the agreements give Palestinians nothing more than well-separated, highly controlled Palestinian homelands within a sovereign Israeli state.

I think that the Palestinian authorities--Yasir Arafat and his group--thought that if they accepted what was put on the table at Oslo by the Israeli government, it would give them something on the ground that would put them in a position to begin regaining the whole of the West Bank and Gaza. Unfortunately, they did not understand the depth of Oslo's deceptiveness. Oslo is indeed leading somewhere. It is leading to the creation of bantustans.

You mention bantustans. Increasingly people, and not only Palestinians, are using the language of apartheid to describe what is going on in Israel. Even some Israeli intellectuals use such terms.

It has become clear that Oslo is an instrument of apartheid. Oslo may give Palestinians a state, but it is a bantustan state. Some Palestinians understood this and warned the Palestinian leadership that if they accepted Oslo they would be stuck with apartheid. What is interesting to note is that the divide-and-rule policy of Oslo was created by Israel's Labor government. But even the apartheid solution of Oslo was not acceptable to the Likud. The peace process has stopped because, for Likud, Oslo gives Palestinians too much.

Just recently Israel has balked at an apparent U.S. plan that would give just 13 percent of the West Bank back to Palestinians. According to Likud and the Israeli right wing, the whole land belongs to the Jewish people. And, unless you are Jewish, you can stay on the land only as a stranger--in biblical language, as an alien who has no rights to the land. The Israeli government often refers to Palestinians as resident aliens. But the alien has no rights to the land itself. Even Palestinians who hold

Israeli citizenship are second-class citizens because they are not Jews.

What now? The Oslo agreement has been signed. Now you have Palestinians in the West Bank living either under Israeli military rule or within these blocks of land that are separated from one another and controlled by checkpoints.

First, all parties should honor that agreement. Whether it's good or bad, it should be honored. What to do after that? For Palestinians, further negotiations are required once Oslo has been fulfilled. Palestinians went to the Madrid Conference in 1991 and to both Oslo meetings on the understanding that the basis for a final agreement is UN resolutions 242 and 338, or as Oslo stipulates, the land-for-peace formula. Palestinians still say that the basis for a final agreement is UN resolution 242. The 242 resolution, now over 30 years old, and which Israel, along with the rest of the world, has not honored, directs Israel to withdraw from all land occupied in the 1967 war.

Of course, some Palestinians who deeply oppose recognizing Oslo at all say people like me are kidding themselves. All that we are going to get is Oslo. But for me, and many other Palestinians, Oslo is one stage that helps accustom Israelis to living next to a Palestinian state. For most Israelis, however, Oslo is the substitute for 242. But for Netanyahu and Likud, not even Oslo is acceptable. They are using Oslo to move away from resolution 242.

It is also important to understand the U.S. role in Oslo. The U.S. took the Israeli-Palestinian conflict out of the UN, in effect saying to the UN, "You sit on the sideline. We'll deal with the problem." The U.S. created the Oslo track by saying, "Let's let the two people negotiate their destiny. Whatever they agree upon should be implemented." But that was like putting a tiger and a deer in a cage and saying, "Negotiate your destiny."

I don't know what is going to happen. The Palestinian leadership is saying that we have an agreement, let's fulfill it. But people in the streets are saying that it is worse now than it was before. People are discovering that Oslo is not going to give them the liberation that they have dreamed about. Those of us who are working for justice are simply saying, "Guys, we are not politicians, we are just telling you simple things. God demands justice. If Oslo is unjust, it's never going to last."

What is everyday life like for Palestinians in the West Bank under the current circumstances?

One thing that has marked the Palestinians for so many years is their ability to keep hoping in the worst situations. A large part of that ability comes from their faith-- whether Islamic or Christian-- that God is a God of justice. But increasingly people have become frustrated and less hopeful because the injustice is being solidified-- consolidated. It becomes part of life--land confiscations, home demolitions, the checkpoints, the exclusion of Jerusalem from the West Bank--just part of everyday life. And people see no change. Some individuals still take their cases to the courts, even to the Supreme Court, but they know that they are fighting a losing battle. They pursue legal measures to calm their consciences--to tell themselves that they have done something. But few hold out the hope of getting back what is rightfully theirs.

Every day we hear words about peace and security, but we don't hear the word justice. The oppressors talk about peace and security but not about justice. For ordinary Palestinians the only hope is the God who created them. Only a miracle will really change things.

I have a number of staff members here who are not Jerusalemites. They are not allowed to enter Jerusalem without special permits which are extremely difficult if not impossible to obtain. During tight closures even those with valid permits are turned back at the checkpoints. Many other organizations face the same difficulties with staff members. Jerusalem is closed to these workers, but they still try to come. Whether they are able to make it here depends on the mood of the soldiers at the checkpoints. When things get hot, as they are now, the workers won't even go to the checkpoints. They take transportation to some point near the perimeter and try to enter. It's miserable, because you are constantly harassed--constantly living in fear.

As you probably know, on March 10 three Palestinian workers in a public taxi were killed at a checkpoint at the entrance to Hebron. The Israeli soldiers are always too quick to open fire on Palestinians. Even if they felt the need to shoot, they could have shot out the tires of the vehicle rather than aim for the passengers' heads. Unfortunately, in no way is this an isolated incident.

I waited for a very qualified staff person--a Palestinian--to come and work for me after she finished her education in the States. She graduated with a degree in youth

ministry, and I desperately needed a youth minister. She was very promising. She lasted one month. She couldn't take the checkpoints. She quit. That happened several months ago and I still cannot find a youth coordinator--a very important ministry.

Another factor is that people's standard of living has gone down as Israel brings in East European laborers so it won't have to depend on Palestinians. Increasingly, many of our people can't afford the rents in Jerusalem so they have to get out. I don't know where the end is. Ultimately, God will intervene.

I don't want it to sound like I'm just sitting down and doing nothing and waiting for God to act. In the meantime we must continue to do our ministry. This is part of our faithfulness to God. But ultimately it is not in the hands of humans. God must intervene to change hearts and circumstances, just as happened in South Africa.