



Report on the CTBI Visit to Israel-Palestine

Introduction

Since 2007 CTBI has attempted to discern the nature of its engagement with the region and in particular with Israel-Palestine. At this stage it was hoped to develop a more formal relationship with the Middle East Council of Churches. However when this proved to be impractical various other options were considered.

The matter was discussed by the CTBI Trustees who examined other options and agreed that a visit to the region should be undertaken by a small group of their number, assisted by a member of staff. This visit would primarily be focused upon the Christian Churches in Israel-Palestine, however other relevant bodies should be visited, especially other faiths and those engaged in peace building.

The visit took place on the 3-8 November and the members of the group were:

HG Bishop Angaelos Coptic Orthodox Church

The Most Revd Richard Clarke Bishop of Meath and Kildare, Church of Ireland

Revd Dr Mary Cotes Ecumenical Officer, Buckinghamshire, Baptist Union

The Very Revd Dr Sheilagh Kesting Ecumenical Officer, Church of Scotland

Gillian Kingston Lay Leader of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland

Revd Peter Colwell Director of Programmes (CTBI)

The visit was arranged by Dr Jane Clements of FODIP (Forum for Discussion of Israel-Palestine) in consultation with CTBI.

The stated purpose of the visit was:

- To listen to the experiences of those that we met
- To invite the churches of the region to offer any comments or messages they would like us to bring back to the British and Irish Churches
- To gain a clearer picture of the issues in Israel-Palestine that will help the CTBI Trustees make an informed decision about the future shape and direction of CTBI's engagement with Israel-Palestine

This report offers an overview of the issues that we identified.

Part 1: Listening to Different Voices and Narratives

We stressed from the outset that we came with no predetermined agenda and that we were there simply to listen. We strove to meet with as many different people as we could however it was not possible to meet with everyone we had hoped to. These different voices included:

1. Different Christian voices from different Christian traditions in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories
2. Different Jewish voices within Israel
3. Those campaigning for peace and justice
4. Those engaged directly with the peace process

The voices that we did not hear include:

1. Those Palestinians and Israelis opposed to any peace process
2. Jewish people living in the illegal settlements
3. Prominent Muslim voices (due to the festival of Eid)

What is clear to us from our conversations is that there are conflicting narratives, historical, political and religious: these are commonly found between Palestinians and Israelis but they are also to be heard within the Palestinian territories and between Israelis. We recognise that there is a huge temptation only to hear those voices with which we are most sympathetic and therefore the challenge is to listen carefully to those voices that challenge us or cause us to react in a defensive or dismissive manner. What follows is a brief overview of those different voices.

Palestinians in the Occupied Territories

Two dates from history were frequently referred to in our conversations. The first was the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the second was the creation of Israel in 1948. Arthur James Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, in a letter to Baron Rothschild, stated

“His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country”.

Until just prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Palestine had been governed under the British Mandate. The United Kingdom is therefore seen to bear considerable responsibility for the present situation. Those within our group who were British citizens have subsequently reflected how uncomfortable they felt being British during this visit. 1948 is of particular significance with many of those with whom we met having personal memories of losing homes and land following the creation of the state of Israel. However, none of the Palestinians we met questioned the right of Israel to exist and in particular Christian leadership were at pains to stress that the Jewish people should have a homeland that is Israel. Some Christian leaders also expressed their view that strong support of Palestinian rights should not be at the expense of relations between the churches and the Jewish community in our own context.

The annexation by Israel of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights in 1967 following the coordinated invasion of Israel by Arab States resulted in further hardship and humiliation for the Palestinians. These are territories that are illegally occupied by Israel

and render its inhabitants stateless. The most frequent phrase used was “daily humiliations” which is an accurate description given the manner in which Palestinians are forced to pass through military checkpoints in order to live their daily lives.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this humiliation we witnessed was in Hebron. The presence of illegal settlers in the heart of the old city has rent asunder a community, forcing businesses to close and preventing Palestinians from walking along certain roads. It was in Hebron where we met two of the Accompaniers from the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine-Israel (www.eappi.org) – a World Council of Churches initiative. They led us on a walking tour of the old city. Here we encountered first hand the effects of occupation (at one point we ourselves were challenged by Israeli soldiers) and heard of the work of Ecumenical Accompaniment programme. We were greatly impressed by them, both in terms of their resilient commitment and their professional skill in maintaining a calm attitude in the face of what must be a frightening and challenging situation. Clearly, the presence of illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem offers the most significant challenge to any peace deal and the future viability of a Palestinian state.

A lunchtime meeting with one of the Palestinian Authority’s Negotiators gave us a useful insight into some of the political issues from the Palestinian perspective. Clearly there is a huge challenge to keep alive the peace process and at that the present time that seems more pressing than a determination to reach the end goal. What was said here, and by many of those we met, was that the acceptance of the State of Israel within the 1967 borders is, for the Palestinian people, a huge and significant concession. The two State Solution therefore offers the only viable way forward for the whole region (the alternative would be a one State solution for Israelis and Palestinians with the consequence of Jews being in a minority). . We remain deeply concerned however as to how achievable a two State Solution is in the short term with the inevitable consequences for the region.

Jewish Voices with Israel

The Chief Rabbi of the UK, Lord Sacks, has often stated that in order to understand Jews today, one must understand two things: the Shoah (Holocaust) and the State of Israel. The truth of this observation was laid bare to us very early on the visit, firstly in a visit to Yad Vashem, and secondly experience of Shabbat evening in Jerusalem, at the Western Wall and then in a Jewish home. The Shoah is an immensely difficult issue to process for non-Jews. Often perceived in isolation as a single event in history, it was in reality the culmination of hundreds of years of entrenched anti-Semitism. Yad Vashem tells this story from a Jewish perspective: Europe had become the place that was no longer safe for Jews, despite efforts at assimilation, and how Zionism, the belief in Jewish self determination in Israel, developed from a minority held opinion to the dominate Jewish idea. Jewish self-determination in the state of Israel becomes the only means of the survival of the Jewish people – their culture and their faith. It is our observation that Yad Vashem has changed over time in the manner in which they tell this story – it has become more nuanced, recognising the complexities and moral contradictions within.

The strength of this Jewish-Israeli story was emphasised in a very different way on Friday evening as we observed the moving atmosphere at the Western Wall and then joined our Jewish host at his home for Shabbat dinner with him and his family. The sense of Jewish people having returned home was immensely strong. But equally striking was the sense of a partial picture; a lack of political awareness of the cost of that self-determination and in particular the devastating affects of the Israeli occupation and the building of illegal settlements.

At the same time we were reminded just how complex Israeli society was through other encounters, especially Rabbis for Human Rights and the experiences of Palestinians who are also Israeli citizens.

The Israeli-Arab voices

Within Israel itself there are around 1.5 million Arabs (Christian and Muslim) who are Israeli citizens. As one of those we met expressed it “we are the left-overs”: those Arabs that did not leave their homes in 1948 and were incorporated into the State of Israel. Their status is complex: on the one hand they vote in Israeli elections and there are Arab members of the Knesset. However, what was shared with us was the significant reality of ongoing discrimination against Arabs within Israeli society with some Israelis regarding their loyalty to the state as suspect. An important recognition of this was the admission in 2008 by the then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that the State of Israel has deliberately and systematically discriminated against its Arab citizens. 60% of Arab families live below the poverty line, compared to only 15% of Jewish families. Some of the discrimination, it was recognised, was internal to the Arab community, eg 66% of Jewish women are employed compared to only 22% of Arab women within Israel (a worse statistic than Saudi Arabia).

One perspective on this situation was that the definition of Israel as a Jewish state was not inclusive of all its citizens and could be interpreted to mean that non-Jews have no future place within Israeli society. As a result of this many Arab-Israelis feel that their identity is incomplete. Arab-Israeli activists are keen to ‘increase the weight’ of the Palestinian presence within Israel, politically, culturally and educationally. They stressed to us the importance of changing Israeli society from within and crucial to this has been a number of successful challenges through the Israeli courts. An example of this was a legal challenge to the view that Arabs are “a problem to be controlled” and not citizens to be served. One aspect of this challenge has included a visit by police chiefs to Northern Ireland to explore developments in policing policy following the Good Friday agreements. This has enabled a different perspective on the problem of the under-policing and over-policing of Arab communities. In the field of education Arab groups have succeeded in convincing many Jewish schools to teach Arab language and culture – in such situations negative attitudes towards Arabs have seen a decrease of more than 50%.

A number of Groups have had some success in using existing accountability structures within Israel (eg. the media and the courts) to address issues of discrimination and inequality. One example of this was an Israeli court ruling that all Israeli citizens have equality under the law when it comes to the leasing of land. How to make Israel a democratic state towards its Arab citizens is the ultimate goal.

In our conversations with Christian Arabs in Israel we were conscious of a very ancient connection to the land and to the early church. Many of them spoke of an inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God that welcomed people regardless of religion or ethnicity.

The Jordanian perspective

Our excursion into Jordan was added to the itinerary during the later stages of planning and came as a direct invitation from the office of HRH Prince Hassan of Jordan. Prince Hassan (the brother of the late King Hussein) is one of the most prominent and respected Muslim advocates for inter faith dialogue and understanding. Jordan is inextricably linked to the Israeli-Palestinian context given that more than half the population of Jordan are technically Palestinian refugees. This has created its own internal issues for Jordan, particularly how to integrate its Palestinian citizens/residents into the political process. However the recent rhetoric of right wing Israeli politicians, that Jordan should be regarded as the Palestinian nation not the West Bank/Gaza strip, threatens to have profound and potentially inflammatory consequences for Jordan and the wider region.

From our brief time in Jordan we detected a scepticism on the willingness of both sides of the conflict to reach accommodation, a frustration with the inflexibility of the present Israeli Government and a concern over various manifestations of financial corruption (referred to as the “economic occupation”).

Part 2: The Christian Churches in Israel-Palestine

The alarming decline in the numbers of Christians in the Middle East, and Israel-Palestine in particular, is now well documented. It is estimated that three quarters of Bethlehem Christians live overseas and there are more Jerusalem Christians resident in Sydney, Australia than in Jerusalem itself. Both Bethlehem and Nazareth once had Christian majorities – they are now outnumbered by Muslims. Of those that remain there is a huge diversity of tradition and of viewpoint on the current situation. What unites them all is a strong sense of commitment to the region, both in terms of seeking a peaceful solution and in their belonging to the land. Some of the points made to us include:

- “without peace there is no hope for the Christian presence in the Holy Land”
- “Christians in the region do not want to be pitied, but want a partnership with the churches in the West that will help to strengthen the Christian presence”
- The importance of promoting the role of women (it was said to us - “only Arab Christians will adequately promote the role of women in Arab society”)
- “Christians do not speak enough about Jerusalem”
- The Churches of Britain and Ireland can help Christians in the Middle East by strengthening Christian institutions through encouraging pilgrimage that is more than visiting “ancient stones” but also engages with Arab Christian people (“the living stones”)
- “Christians are the guarantors of peace and security”
- A disappointment that Christian Aid does not engage more with the churches in the region

- Some of those with whom we met supported “boycotts” whilst others did not.
- “We belong to the land; the land does not belong to us”
- “do not offer us your friendship if it means that you hate the Jews”

The “Kairos Document” deserves special mention. We met with some of those who have initiated this process and written the document. It declares itself to be “the Christian Palestinians’ word to the world about what is happening in Palestine” and states that “the military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity, and that any theology that legitimizes the occupation is far from Christian teachings because true Christian theology is a theology of love and solidarity with the oppressed, a call to justice and equality among peoples” (<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/>). Much of the document is a theology of liberation for the Palestinian people but has become known to many only through its call to boycott goods produced in illegal Israeli settlements.

As well as meeting with some of those closely involved in this initiative, we also asked the church leaders with whom we met about the status of the document. It was clear to us that the Kairos Document is *one voice* representing an important strand of thinking within the Christian community (especially grassroots) and whilst not a definitive view of all the churches it is nonetheless a perspective which the churches of the region hope Christians in Britain and Ireland will engage with and respond to as they feel led.

Almost all of the Christians we met expressed deep concern over some of the thinking within Christian-Zionism: a millenarian theology which believes that hastening the return of Jews to the Levant will hasten the second coming of Christ. Such a theology is strident in its support of Israeli expansion, is heavily funded by conservative American churches and is dismissive of the experience of the indigenous Christians of the region. It is also supercessionist in its attitudes to contemporary Judaism and often Islamophobic. Clearly Christian-Zionism is identified as a key issue for Middle Eastern Christians.

Part 3: Recommendations

This very brief report is intended merely as an overview of the visit for the CTBI Board of Trustees. The visit was very worthwhile and extremely challenging. We remain convinced that CTBI has an important role to play, alongside the different involvement of many of our member churches. In particular we identify three issues for further reflection (1) status of Jerusalem (2) right of return of refugees (3) the status and future of illegal settlements.

Our recommendations for further action are currently being considered by the CTBI Trustees and these will be published as soon as they are agreed.

Appendix: Main Items of the Itinerary

St. Andrew's, Church of Scotland, Jerusalem (Revd George Shand)

Yad Vashem, Holocaust Memorial Museum

His Eminence Metropolitan Abraham, Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem & the Near East

Shabbat at the Western Wall and the home of David and Galit Lester

Mohamad Darawshe, Abraham Fund Initiatives

++Abuna Elias Chacour, Archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church

Dr Baheg Mansour, Director of the Department of Religions within the Israeli Foreign Ministry

Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bethlehem (Sunday worship)

Hebron with EAPPI

Signatories to the KAIROS-Palestine Document

Amman, Jordan: HRH Prince Hassan and HE Kamal Abu Jaber

Rabbis for Human Rights

Bishop Suheil Dawani, Anglican Bishop, Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East

Bishop Munib A. Younan, Lutheran Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land