

The learning tour in Israel/Palestine

Personal reflections

The conflict in Israel/Palestine is both ancient and modern. It is religious and secular. It is fought with words and weapons. The conflict is about land, the air above it and the water below it. Our time as a delegation of leaders from Mennonite Church USA earlier this year allowed us just a few glimpses into what often feels like an intractable situation.

As Western visitors, we traveled unhindered across formal and informal divides during our trip. This privilege provided our group with a unique perspective that many people we met don't gain because of travel restrictions, cultural differences and fear.

Stories of people we met

The local and global politics are complicated as are the stories of the people we met along the way. I was pleased to spend time with Palestinian Christians. Some live on the "wrong" side of the wall in the West Bank, and others live in Israel. I often thought of the current situation in Israel/Palestine as the source of global conflict between Jews and Muslims. But the Christian community, while small, has lived in this place for hundreds of years. Their steadfastness in pursuing change in love was inspiring.

Here are the stories of a few Christian, Muslim and Jewish people we met:

Sabreen (name changed) is bright. At 13 she speaks Arabic, English and German. Her grades place her at the top of her class. She wants to attend Harvard. She raps the latest lyrics from American hip hop artists. She dreams of visiting the United States – and Jerusalem just a few miles from her home in Bethlehem which is in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank.



She lives behind a wall that keeps her and her Christian family from visiting Jerusalem for more than a few days a year around Christmas and Easter, if they obtain permission in advance. The wall snakes around the northern edge of her city. Today, she may have a greater chance of attending Harvard than of regularly visiting family in nearby Jerusalem.

Alex Awad, Dean of Students and Professor at the Bethlehem Bible College, encourages western Christians to reconsider their unyielding support for the modern Israel because of its believed role in "end-times" narratives. We are invited to imagine how Alex and his fellow Christians in the West Bank might read the biblical accounts of God's promise of land to the Jews since he as a Christian can't participate in that promise.



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Moussa is talented and steadfast. By his age and appearance he may define who Israelis fear. He documents in photos the occupation of his city to remember the indignity of his grandparents being forced from their homes in 1948.

He photographs the Aida Refugee Camp, one of 59 in the region. He shows the tears of refugees after tear gas and rubber bullets rain down. He photographs the disproportionate response to young Palestinians who hurl rocks at the watchtowers dotting the wall. A Muslim, he has been shot, detained, interrogated and threatened.

Rabbi Paer is a gentle man. He is a fast-talking, funny, devout family man. His chatty, intelligent young girls are steeped in the Torah and its teachings. We are welcomed into their comfortable apartment for Shabbat dinner after Friday service. It could just as well be New York, where the rabbi and his wife lived before they moved to Jerusalem 15 years ago. They too are tied to the land, but by God's promise, not by a wall. He said God promised this land to the Jews.

After the Holocaust, the Jews had to have a place they could call home, where they could be safe from the evils of anti-Semitism. Never again, it is said of the terror in mid-20th century Europe, never again. Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust museum, reminds us that the Second World War events resulted in roughly a third of the world's Jews being killed.

Abdullah leads us through the ghost town streets of Hebron with an easy calm that defies the tension hanging in the air. We pass through checkpoints manned by young Israeli conscripts. We intermingle with guards, international observers, young Muslim school girls and a group of military cadets. But this is no melting pot.

Anywhere else in the world, we could all talk, share space and be friends. Abdullah pauses at certain intersections, instructing us to walk further to observe the separation among people here. Meanwhile, he stops and smokes because as a Palestinian, he's not permitted on those streets.

Ar'yel was born a Christian in Dordrecht, Holland. He was a Baptist pastor, but increasingly his reading of the Old Testament and many tours to the Holy Land led him to Judaism. He joined other Jews living in a garrison town deep inside the occupied Palestinian territory on the West Bank. God's promise of land flowing with milk and honey to Moses gives him comfort that he's on the right side of this conflict.



He wants nothing more than to be able to take tea with his Palestinian neighbors, he says. He wants peace as much as anyone. He agrees it's not nice what Palestinians have to endure, but it's less bad than terrorist strikes that kill Jews. It is unfortunate that we have to live this way, he tells us. He and his family live within the peaceful confines of the settlement, but he lives in fear the moment he gets on the main road beyond the gate. He carries a hand gun for safety.



Sam Bahour, a middle-aged Palestinian born in Youngstown, Ohio, recounts his return in 1994 to Ramallah in the West Bank, the land of his parents and his wife. He saw an opportunity to engage in the growth of Palestine through his business skills. He could attend a prestigious business school in Tel Aviv with movers and shakers in Israeli business and politics because he was an American. He and others developed the telecommunications system of the West Bank.

But every three months for 15 years he left the country to renew his tourist visa. Eventually, border officials stamped his passport, showing this visa was his last. He and his wife were granted a reunification visa, allowing him to stay in the West Bank, but his American passport no longer gives him the ability to travel in Israel. He needed special permission to go to Jerusalem for business meetings. "Please excuse us," he says. "This system makes us crazy."

Everence investments in this region

The Everence stewardship investment guidelines include firearms, military spending and human rights abuses among its negative screens. I'm pleased that our human rights and military screens catch the companies directly tied to the violence and human rights abuse in this conflict region.

According to our social research partners, a few additional companies we invest in are producing products, generally benign in nature, that are being used simultaneously to both harm and help communities in this troubled region. We have relied on these partners to both help us understand the complexity of the corporate activity around the world and in specific regions deemed "areas of conflict," of which the Israel/Palestine region is one.

We continue to discern how to incorporate region-specific concerns in the context of a large investment universe that demands a systematic global approach. My hope is that by working together with others in the faith community we can respond to the call for justice while managing the church's resources prudently and productively.

All around us we saw and heard signs of devotion. Christian pilgrims from around the world walk the traditional last steps of Jesus. Along the Western Wall, hundreds of Jews pray. Minarets all across the West Bank host the Muslim calls to prayer that echo across cities and hillsides five times daily.

We too joined in this devotion as we floated on the Sea of Galilee on a calm Sunday morning, conjuring the stories of Jesus preaching "blessed are the peacemakers" on the hillside above Capernaum, feeding the 5,000, walking on these same roiling waters, and calling his disciples to drop their nets. I wondered as we sat there, can there be peace in this disputed land?



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