

# The Israel – Palestine Problem: The perspective of a New Zealand Muslim

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**Religious teachings can be misused and misconstrued by extremists to exacerbate a situation. Ultimately, religion has been used by both sides in this conflict to garner support for political conflict. Religious difference as a cause for hate is nothing new yet there is nothing within the Jewish or Muslim faiths that preclude them from living side by side.**

The Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) have been a source of conflict for much of the twentieth century. The factors and underlying issues giving rise to this conflict are many and varied, but the reality is that there can be no peace without justice. While the Israelis have a deep-seated desire to create a homeland on land that has deep spiritual significance for them as well as for three other faiths<sup>35</sup>, the Palestinians are people dispossessed of their lands and without self-autonomy, forced to endure an occupation not of their making.

There have been too many casualties on both sides of this conflict. Since 29 September 2000, 121 Israeli children and 724 Palestinian children have been killed<sup>36</sup>. These children are the most innocent victims of this long-running dispute. The majority of deaths of Israeli children are the result of suicide bombers or of Palestinian gunfire.

*The majority of [Palestinian] children were killed and injured while going about normal*

*daily activities, such as going to school, playing, shopping, or simply being in their homes.*<sup>37</sup>

Palestinian children have died predominantly as a result of gunfire from Israeli soldiers or settlers, or from the use of teargas and exploding mines. Some have died during home demolitions or because they had been unable to access medical care.

Looking at overall deaths, 1,084<sup>38</sup> Israelis and 3,887<sup>39</sup> Palestinians have been killed since 29 September 2000. In that same period, 7,633 Israelis and 29,985 Palestinians have been injured. Israeli deaths have largely been as a result of suicide bombings and shooting, and include both soldiers and civilians. The vast majority of Palestinian injuries have been caused by live ammunition, rubber/plastic coated bullets and tear gas. Many of the Palestinian injuries were from shooting unarmed people and resulted from a change in policy in relation to the use of arms<sup>40</sup>. There is evidence of a shoot to kill policy,

<sup>35</sup> The Christian and Jewish faiths revere the land due to references in their scriptures and historical reasons; the Al-Aqsa mosque is one of the holiest sites for Muslims, and Jerusalem was the first *qiblah* (direction for prayer); members of the Bahai faith make their annual pilgrimage to the city of Haifa.

<sup>36</sup> [www.rememberthesechildren.org/remember2000.html](http://www.rememberthesechildren.org/remember2000.html). 29 September 2000 is the date of the second intifada (uprising), started following a visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque by Ariel Sharon and 1,000 policemen. In the ensuing protests, 13 Palestinians (12 of them Israeli citizens) were killed by Israeli police.

<sup>37</sup> "Palestinian Children and the Second Intifada", Catherine Cook, Media Coordinator at the Middle East Research and Information Project, [www.merip.org/](http://www.merip.org/).

<sup>38</sup> Israeli Defence Forces, [www1.idf.il/SIP\\_STORAGE/DOVER/files/7/21827.doc](http://www1.idf.il/SIP_STORAGE/DOVER/files/7/21827.doc). See also [www1.idf.il/SIP\\_STORAGE/DOVER/files/4/33524.doc](http://www1.idf.il/SIP_STORAGE/DOVER/files/4/33524.doc) for causes of death.

<sup>39</sup> [www.palestinercs.org/crisistables/table\\_of\\_figures.htm](http://www.palestinercs.org/crisistables/table_of_figures.htm).

<sup>40</sup> B'tselem, the Israeli Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, [www.btselem.org/English/Firearms/](http://www.btselem.org/English/Firearms/).

which has been documented from testimonials provided by Israeli soldiers<sup>41</sup>.

At present, no Israeli citizens are being held prisoner by Palestinians, while 8,238<sup>42</sup> Palestinians are imprisoned by Israel. "Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, over 650,000 Palestinians have been detained by Israel... Palestinians are tried within Israeli military courts located within Israeli military centres in the OPT. These military tribunals are presided over by a panel of three judges appointed by the military"...

*A Palestinian detainee can be interrogated for a total period of 180 days, during which he/she can also be denied lawyer visits for a period of 90 days. During the interrogation period, a detainee is often subjected to some form of torture ranging in extremity, whether physical or psychological.*<sup>43</sup>

Documented methods of torture include sleep deprivation, violence, and exposure to extreme heat or cold<sup>44</sup>. The poor treatment of prisoners was the cause of the 2005 hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners. As a punishment, the prisoners' cells were doused with large amounts of water, so that all bedding and belongings remained wet all night in extremely cold weather.

Palestinians can also be held in administrative detention, meaning they are held without charges or trial. The period of administrative detention is between 1-6 months, but this can be renewed indefinitely. One Palestinian prisoner was held for over 8 years in administrative detention. The basis for the detention is secret evidence presented to military tribunals, which neither the detainee nor legal counsel can access. It should be noted that many left and right wing Israeli citizens are also being held in administrative detention.

Since 29 September 2000, one Israeli home has been demolished by a suicide bomber, while 4,170 Palestinian homes have been demolished by the

Israeli Defence Forces (IDF)<sup>45</sup>. Home demolitions come under three categories. They may be demolished in "clearing operations", which occur near settlements, army posts, the Egyptian border and any roads used by settlers or the IDF.

In other cases, homes are demolished for being built without a permit:

*Over the past three decades of occupation, Israel has employed in the West Bank a policy of planning, development, and building that severely restricts construction by Palestinians, while allocating broad expanses of land to establish and expand Jewish settlements. In this way, Israel has created a situation in which thousands of Palestinians are unable to obtain permits to build on their land, and are compelled to build without a permit because they have no other way to provide shelter for their families...*

*In the past ten years, the authorities have demolished more than 2,200 residences, leaving more than 13,000 Palestinians homeless... At the same time, at least 155 Israeli settlements, containing more than 170,000 Jewish Israeli citizens, have been established... thousands of houses were built in these settlements without permits. Israel... issued retroactive building permits.*<sup>46</sup>

The final reason for home demolition is to punish the relatives of those who have carried out or are suspected of organising attacks against Israelis. The practice of punitive home demolitions was discontinued in 2005.

As mentioned above, the opposite side to home demolitions is the development of illegal settlements on occupied land. Since 29 September 2000 there have been more than 60 Jewish settlements built on occupied land. Some of these lands were held by Palestinian families for generations, going back two or three hundred years. The Palestinians have a deep-rooted attachment to the land, and losing them to settlements is heartbreaking for them.

<sup>41</sup> [www.jerusalem.org/memoirs/Israel%20soldiers/index.htm](http://www.jerusalem.org/memoirs/Israel%20soldiers/index.htm).

<sup>42</sup> [www.btselem.org/english/statistics/Detainees\\_and\\_Prisoners.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/statistics/Detainees_and_Prisoners.asp).

<sup>43</sup> Palestinian Monitor, [www.palestinemonitor.org/factsheet/Palestinian\\_Prisoners.html](http://www.palestinemonitor.org/factsheet/Palestinian_Prisoners.html).

<sup>44</sup> Public Committee Against Torture in Israel [www.stoptorture.org.il/eng/background.asp?menu=3&submenu=3](http://www.stoptorture.org.il/eng/background.asp?menu=3&submenu=3).

<sup>45</sup> [www.btselem.org/english/Publications/Summaries/200411\\_Punitive\\_House\\_Demolitions.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/Publications/Summaries/200411_Punitive_House_Demolitions.asp).

<sup>46</sup> [www.btselem.org/english/Planning\\_and\\_Building/Index.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/Planning_and_Building/Index.asp).

Palestinians have never been compensated for land that has been confiscated.

The settlements are in breach of United Nations Resolution number 465, which states that “all measures taken by Israel to change the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure of status of the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem, or any part thereof, have no legal validity and that Israel’s policy and practices of setting parts of its population and new Immigrants in those territories constitute a flagrant violation of the fourth Geneva convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war and also constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.”

The Resolution goes on to state that the United Nations “Strongly deplores the continuation and persistence of Israel in pursuing those policies and practices and calls upon the government and people of Israel to rescind those measures, to dismantle the existing settlements and in particular to cease, on an urgent basis, the establishment, construction and planning of settlements in the Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem.”<sup>47</sup>

One of the conditions of the Road Map to Peace was that Israel would freeze all settlement activity. The Road Map has, to all intents and purposes, been abandoned and Al-Jazeera reported on 14 March 2006 that “The Israeli government has begun to develop facilities for what eventually could be the largest settlement project in the West Bank since 1967... In addition to 3,550 settler units, the planned development would include a road network, six hotels and a park. Non-Jews would not be allowed to live or buy land in the settlement.”

In addition to the illegal settlements, “[a]n extensive road network has been constructed for settlers to facilitate their easy access to and from Israel and between settlements. The roads circumvent and cut-through Palestinian towns and villages... The roads

prevent many Palestinians from going the direct way to their destination, because the Palestinians can neither use them nor cross them.... All the roads have a 50 – 75m buffer zone on each side of the road in which no construction is allowed. This has led to a great loss of agricultural and privately-owned Palestinian land.”<sup>48</sup>

Even on land that they still officially own, Palestinians have been unable to cultivate that land and harvest their crops. In 2004 over 6,000 acres over a wide area of the Negev had been sprayed with herbicide to deliberately kill crops of wheat and barley planted by Bedouin tribes. This “surge in activity is not accidental. It is the result of a government plan, personally approved a year ago by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and backed by \$200 million, to force the rural beduin (sic) off their lands and into a handful of urban reservations the state is building for them... Professor Yitzhak Nevo, of Ben-Gurion University in Beer Sheva, says: ‘When crops are destroyed, the population is at risk of malnutrition and hunger. And that’s what the government aims at: to use poverty and hunger to coerce the beduin to accept a townships policy.’”<sup>49</sup>

In addition to this policy, settlers actively prevent Palestinians from cultivating their land. The Christian Peacemakers Team (CPT)<sup>50</sup> has reported that settlers have shot at their team members and Palestinians when they have tried to harvest ripe crops. A recent post of 5 May 2006 details a typical incident: “Janzen and Meyer [Team members] accompanied a family harvesting wheat from their fields above Avigail outpost. Settlers from Avigail ploughed under the family’s lentil crop in these fields in February 2005; settlers ploughed the field again in December 2005 after Palestinians had planted wheat, and grazed their animals on this wheat a week ago.”

There is gross inequality in the way that water is used. “Two years ago [in 2000], the Ha’aretz newspaper reported that 80% of the water goes to Israelis on both sides of the green line, while 20% is left for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. A 1999 study by the World Bank showed that the

<sup>47</sup> Resolution 465 (1980), passed 1 March 1980, S/RES/465 (1980). [domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/9a798adbf322aff38525617b006d88d7/5aa254a1c8f8b1cb852560e50075d7d5!OpenDocument](http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/9a798adbf322aff38525617b006d88d7/5aa254a1c8f8b1cb852560e50075d7d5!OpenDocument). Note that Israel has breached more than 60 UN resolutions: see [www.middleeastnews.com/unresolutionslist.html](http://www.middleeastnews.com/unresolutionslist.html), while 21 Security Council resolutions have been vetoed by the United States [www.caabu.org/press/documents/vetoes.html](http://www.caabu.org/press/documents/vetoes.html).

<sup>48</sup> Palestinian Monitor, [www.palestinemonitor.org/factsheet/israeli\\_settlements\\_on\\_occupied.htm](http://www.palestinemonitor.org/factsheet/israeli_settlements_on_occupied.htm).

<sup>49</sup> “Israelis kill crops to oust beduin”, Jonathon Cook, [www.thewe.cc/contents/more/archive2004/february/ethnic\\_cleansing\\_in\\_the\\_beduin\\_desert.htm](http://www.thewe.cc/contents/more/archive2004/february/ethnic_cleansing_in_the_beduin_desert.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Regular updates from Hebron and other areas around the world can be found at [www.cpt.org/archives.php](http://www.cpt.org/archives.php).

Palestinians are the thriftiest consumers of water in the Middle East. Annual per capita use is 375 cubic meters for Israelis and 115 cubic meters for residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip”.<sup>51</sup> The New Scientist reported in 2004 that “Palestinians badly need more water. Under the Oslo agreement they have access to 57 cubic metres of water per person per year from all sources. Israel gets 246 cubic metres per head per year. And in the nearly 40 years that Israel has controlled the West Bank, Palestinians have been largely forbidden from drilling new wells or rehabilitating old ones”.<sup>52</sup> In addition, CPT have documented cases of existing wells being poisoned by settlers.

**While high-level talks and peace negotiations continually break down and fail, the work for peace can and should continue at grass roots levels.**

Medical care has become extremely difficult to provide. Restricted movement has become a major barrier, and there are now an increasing number of areas that have become isolated from the urban centres where medical care has traditionally been provided. There are issues around training of Palestinian medical professionals, as it has become extremely difficult for Palestinians in the OPT to travel abroad for education.<sup>53</sup> In addition, there have been instances such as the 2003 IDF raid into the Jenin refugee camp, when medical professionals were barred from entering the camp for eleven days<sup>54</sup>.

While such injustices continue, it is difficult to see way a forward to a peaceful solution. Until the Palestinian people have a viable country that provides them with access to employment and a decent standard of living, adequate health care, education and freedom of movement, they have little hope for the future. Without hope, with ever-increasing despair, it is sad but not surprising that violence becomes an outlet to express frustration and rage.

Islam allows for the concept of a just war for the purposes of self-defence. Christianity also has the concept of a just war, while offensive war is generally prohibited in Jewish law<sup>55</sup>. Islam goes further, to encourage Muslims to fight against oppression, in order to liberate the oppressor and the oppressed. The rules around Islamic warfare are strict, and do not permit the killing of civilians or the destruction of property. And Islam considers that peaceful negotiation is paramount – war is a last resort, and even during warfare the Quran instructs that when the opposition asks to negotiate, Muslims must put down arms and negotiate.

It is true that religious teachings have been misused and misconstrued by extreme religious groups to exacerbate the situation. It is also true that when a group has suffered monstrosities, they too become monsters. Ultimately, though, religion has been used by both sides as a motivating factor to garner support for political conflict. Religious differences being used as a cause for hating others is nothing new, and is a tactic that has been used all over the world and throughout the ages.

Yet there is nothing intrinsically within the Jewish or Muslim faiths that preclude them from living side by side. The first treaty entered to by Muhammad was with the Jewish tribes of Yathrib (now Medina, in Saudi Arabia). It set out the terms and conditions under which the two communities would live side by side. When Jerusalem was taken from the Romans by Muslims, Caliph Omar ibn Al-Khattab refused to expel Jews from the city, even though requested to do so by the Christian community. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jews fled from Europe to escape persecution, and found safe haven in the Ottoman Empire. There they were able to live and practice their religion in peace.

<sup>51</sup> [www.cpt.org/archives/2002/sep02/0005.html](http://www.cpt.org/archives/2002/sep02/0005.html).

<sup>52</sup> Fred Pearce, “Israel lays claim to Palestine’s water”, New Scientist, [www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn5037](http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn5037).

<sup>53</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, [www.phr.org.il/phr/article.asp?articleid=72&catid=45&pcat=45&lang=ENG](http://www.phr.org.il/phr/article.asp?articleid=72&catid=45&pcat=45&lang=ENG).

<sup>54</sup> [web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMD151492002?open&of=ENG-2MD](http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMD151492002?open&of=ENG-2MD).

<sup>55</sup> [www.gmu.edu/departments/crdc/docs/j\\_limitsofwar\\_and\\_cr.html#\\_ftn6#\\_ftn6](http://www.gmu.edu/departments/crdc/docs/j_limitsofwar_and_cr.html#_ftn6#_ftn6). See also [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just\\_war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_war)

Jerusalem itself has been a model of co-existence and harmony for over a thousand years. Except for the Crusades, which saw wholesale massacres of both the Muslim and Jewish populations<sup>56</sup>, all three faith groups had lived peacefully within the city.

There is no inherent reason why peace can not be achieved in the Holy Land again. It's a matter of will. And a matter of justice. In order for a viable Palestinian state to emerge, there must be a full dismantling of settlements from the West Bank, a dismantling of checkpoints, and an ability for Palestinians to export and import goods. The dismantling of the Gaza settlements shows that this can be done, although Gaza suffers from being effectively besieged as ever.

Justice means a balanced share of resources, particularly of water and roads. It means fair and transparent trials, with access to information held against suspects and adequate legal representation. And it means fair and full compensation for land that was taken by force or through acts of terror.

The Palestinian state too must provide guarantee of security to Israel. Again, in order for peace to exist, the Israeli people need to feel safe and secure, able to go about their daily lives without fear of attack. Unfortunately, ceasefires have been unsuccessful to date, because non-violence has not lead to any changes to the underlying situation. To continue to construct settlements, to deny Palestinians access to their own farms, to harass children as they go to school is to continue a silent war against the occupants of the land. Exacerbating the situation is the in-fighting amongst Palestinian groups, who struggle against each other for control of the OPT.

Yet there is hope, and it lies in the work done by various peace groups in the regions. There are numerous examples of Palestinian and Israeli citizens working together to achieve positive outcomes. These groups have shown that both Israelis and Palestinians are able to overcome their differences. Groups such as Bat Shalom<sup>57</sup>, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions<sup>58</sup>, and Ta'ayush<sup>59</sup> contain Israeli and Palestinian activists who campaign together against injustice. From the

rebuilding of homes, the provision of food and medical care, and the combined protests against the wall, these groups show what we know to be the truth: that Jews and Muslims can work together, live together and understand each other.

It is through strengthening of such organisations, and by increasing the opportunities for dialogue that a real and lasting solution for this conflict can arise. The best path to peace lies in creating an opportunity for people on each side to hear the other's pain, to know each other's hopes and aspirations. There have been instances of this happening in other conflict situations, such as the following case in Northern Ireland:

*Some of the first efforts to sponsor reconciliation in Northern Ireland through religious engagement and dialogue occurred in the mid-1970. One such effort took place in December 1974, when the IRA met a group of Protestants — mostly clergymen — for discussions. The talks did not bring any immediate fruits, but they planted seeds for a process that was to become reality 20 years later. Reconciliation takes a long time.*

*Most significantly for the peace process, a strong friendship arose and deepened from the early 1980s onwards between Rev. Ken Newell, a moderator at the Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, and Fr. Gerry Reynolds of Clonard Monastery, a Roman Catholic community in west Belfast.*

*The Clonard-Fitzroy Fellowship began with Bible study, which made everyone feel comfortable with each other. Then, the Fellowship responded to the larger political scene together, and Gerry Reynolds and Ken Newell were unafraid to discuss and pursue any political concerns. Indeed, Reynolds and Newell went even further, engaging in secret discussions with the leaders of both IRA and Loyalist paramilitary organizations. These meetings... had to be secret because the bombing campaign of the IRA was continuing, and the doctrine from the British Government was that there could be no talks with terrorists unless there was first a ceasefire.<sup>60</sup>*

<sup>56</sup> "The Medieval World", Frederich Heer, 1961, Mentor Books

<sup>57</sup> [www.batshalom.org](http://www.batshalom.org)

<sup>58</sup> [www.icahd.org/eng](http://www.icahd.org/eng)

<sup>59</sup> [www.taayush.org](http://www.taayush.org)

<sup>60</sup> [www.globalengage.org/issues/2005/08/ireland.htm](http://www.globalengage.org/issues/2005/08/ireland.htm)

Similar work happened through the Truth and Reconciliation Committees in South Africa. Again, much conflict was averted through the ability for opposing groups to have a dialogue, and to understand each other's points of view. While high-level talks and peace negotiations continually break down and fail, the work for peace can and should continue at grass roots levels.

What we can do here in New Zealand is to show that it is possible for opposing sides to sit together and discuss the issues. That is why this has been such an important exercise – writing this paper in consultation with Dave Moskovitz has given us both the opportunity to understand each other. And while I do still disagree with some elements of what he says – and no doubt he feels the same about my piece – we largely agree on the way forward: meet, discuss,

learn about each other, work together, and together create a future we can all live with. It is the goodwill between us that gives me the greatest hope that peace is a definite possibility. It will only happen here and in Palestine/Israel if we keep our communications channels open and listen honestly with an open heart.

Whatever step we can take to create and foster goodwill and trust is a step towards peace.

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The Dome of the Rock, Al-Haram al-Sharif, Jerusalem  
*Picture: Ruth DeSouza*