

From a Crossings Colleague in Beirut, Lebanon: “How the Israel-Palestine Conflict Looks from Here.”

Colleagues,

Art Preisinger and wife Mitzi are in Beirut, Lebanon this semester. They're at Near East School of Theology [NEST] as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers. Art's teaching church history. Mitzi's also doing useful work. Art and I were classmates in seminary days. I asked him for something that I could pass on to the listserve readership. This is what he sent. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A couple of weeks ago a neighbor from the States sent me an email the Subject of which was “Confused.” He was trying to understand why there is so much bitterness toward the United States by Arab countries, why “certain elements in the country (U.S.) decried the flying of the American flag and the display of the motto ‘In God We Trust,’” etc.

My neighbor is a good man, generous to a fault. He goes out of his way to help others. He will give you the shirt off his back. I have great respect for him and consider him a good friend. He calls himself a Christian and a patriotic American. I suspect he equates the two. He is a retired military officer, and his

thinking about the Middle East crisis is probably how approximately 80% of the American people think about it.

The following answer to his letter is my impression of how the majority of people here in the Middle East view America and American policy:

Dear _____, You note that the September 11 attack was the work of terrorists. And so it was. The media and the administration picked up on that designation and now, it seems, anybody who is deemed an enemy of the U.S. is a "terrorist."

We are engaged in a "war on terrorism." Labels are curious things – repeat them often enough and whether they represent the reality or not, people perceive it to be the reality. Consider what that means: we are involved in an undeclared war (undeclared, since the war is against individuals, not nations), but a war nevertheless. The political payoff is immense: you can never really win this war (will terrorists lay down their anthrax, their pipe bombs, their pilots' licences and come in with their hands up?), and so by its very nature you can prolong it indefinitely.

Folks over here get the impression that the Bush administration is using "terror" and "terrorism" as a rationale for going to war against Iraq in order to oust Saddam Hussein. They think we Americans reserve the right to choose the leaders of other countries. They think that is downright arrogant. Iraq, it is said, will shortly have nuclear capability unless we stop it. A Muslim respondent at a recent Christian-Muslim dialogue which I attended asked, "Why is it that Israel can have all the weapons it wants, but Iraq cannot, nor can the PLO?" They ask why we accuse Yasser Arafat of brutality and violence, but call Ariel Sharon "a man of peace." They say blood has been on Sharon's hands since 1952, when he committed atrocities under the aegis

of Menachim Begin and the Israeli underground Irgun.

You point out that suicide bomber attacks have no respect for women and children. People here would admit to that, but they would also point out that recent Israeli terrorist attacks in the West Bank have no respect for women and children, either. Why does Israel refuse to let U.N. observers go into Jenin, after Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have blown the whistle on Israeli atrocities there? The answer is obvious.

Why did the U.S. now decide to opt out of the new International Criminal Court with the flimsy excuse that "we don't want our military hauled before a foreign tribunal"? Was it because there is talk of putting Sharon in the docket for crimes against humanity?

You say that "a recent poll of Arab nations showed they disagreed with the position of the United States fighting terrorism." First of all, people here ask why should they agree with United States policy. Should they ask "how high?" every time America says "Jump!" Secondly, people here are not likely to be subject to American-Israeli propaganda and they are of the opinion that the way America and Israel are "fighting terrorism" is wrong-headed, counterproductive and simply breeds more terrorism. They ask, "Do you honestly believe that bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age, or pulverizing with brute force village after village of occupied territory, is going to stop terrorism? That only increases the resolve of real terrorists and so-called ones." Sharon is not so stupid as to think his bullying will stop terrorism. It is clear to most people here that the militant Zionists want all of Palestine, and they are willing to sacrifice peace in order to get it. Extreme Zionists, especially those who live in the illegal settlements, have said so unabashedly, up front. Two days ago

that became abundantly clear when the Likud party, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, resolved never to allow a Palestinian state to exist. "There," argue the Arabs, "is the proof of the pudding. We knew it all along."

I must emphasize that the anger the Arabs feel toward the United States is an anger directed at the leadership and the Middle East policies of the U.S. government, and not at the American people. We feel as safe here as in a place where someone puts anthrax into letters and pipe bombs into mailboxes.

The real danger for us is not from the Muslims but from the possibility of an invasion by Israel. The supreme irony would be to be killed by a bomb made in America, dropped from a plane made in America. Israel does fly over Lebanon, including Beirut, often; so often, in fact, that the Lebanese pay little attention to it.

We are learning much about Islam, including that elusive word, "Jihad." Jihad does mean "holy war." But war can be defined in many ways, not always as violent physical conflict. But most Americans think of it that way, i.e., as physical conflict. And since it is "holy" there is a religious significance to it. Because of September 11 and bin Laden's pronouncements, panicked people imagine that Islam is bent on destroying its two counterparts, Christianity and Judaism. The anti-Christian persecutions in such places as Nigeria, Sudan, and Indonesia do not help to counter that perception. Those situations are to be closely watched, even as Muslim leaders here keep reminding us that "Islam is a religion of peace."

You seem to think that the West is completely Christianized and the East Islamicized. I think your mistake is in equating the West with Christianity, and failing to realize that there are

Christian Arabs, many of whom are leaving because of Israeli persecution. So in Western eyes, it's an "us" (Christians) vs. "them" (Muslims). The problem is an imbalance of cultures. Islam, like fundamentalist Christianity, recognizes no difference between "church and state." America, however, has a history of the separation of the two, much to the dismay of those Christians who want it the Islamic way: America should be a Christian nation! This has implications for U.S.-Israel relations, because in the Christian millennialist scenario, the state of Israel must be established in preparation for the return of Christ. This is the reason for the support of Israel by Christian Zionists; Christians who, under any other circumstances, would not dream of being bedfellows with Jews.

Another irony is the fact that Israel is a "secular" nation and most of its inhabitants keep up Jewish traditions, not Judaism. Many, like Christmas and Easter Christians, hardly darken the doors of synagogue or temple. Yet these same people are quick to quote the Old Testament about God "giving the land to Jews in perpetuity," thus using a religious justification for a political purpose. And the question arises, "Are contemporary Israelis the bona fide descendants of the Israelites to whom God made this promise?"

Imad Salti is a 22-year-old Palestinian Christian from Beit Jala in the West Bank. Beit Jala is about one kilometer from Bethlehem. Imad is one of my students, and an Arab Christian. He is going to be a pastor. I find it difficult to have much sympathy for a country whose armed might has wantonly destroyed much of Imad's village, whose tanks point their guns at the home of Imad's mother. Imad has a difficult time getting back home for vacations. And if and when he does, he is confronted by Israeli soldiers who humiliate him, who cause terrible economic hardship for Palestinians, who have driven out much of the Christian Arab population, and oppress those who stay.

I must also say that the Palestinians are not well-received here, or for that matter almost anywhere. In a way, today's Palestinians are yesterday's Jews. Nobody wants them. They have been thrown off their land and in many cases deprived of their livelihood. They are oppressed and marginalized by the very people who themselves were oppressed and marginalized. What a strange turn of events. There is a large Palestinian camp here in Beirut. We have not been inside it, but from the looks of it, as well as from local reports, it is similar to the abysmal townships outside the cities of South Africa. Poverty is a way of life. Then, too, Syria maintains hegemony over Lebanon by supporting Hezbollah, particularly along the so-called Blue Line in South Lebanon, the border between Lebanon and Israel. We were there a couple of weeks ago, no more than a kilometer from the border. One can see the Israeli lookout post on Mt. Hermon and the disputed Shebaa farms.

I close with a personal note: I decry and abhor the suicide bombings of innocent Israeli people, including women and children. I decry and abhor the brutal suppression and massacre of Palestinian people, including women and children.

I have said this before: I think Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu, and their cronies are destroying their own country. They have squandered Israel's moral capital, and have left Israel morally bankrupt.

Your friend and neighbor,

Art