

Correspondence with a Quaker

by **Ardie Geldman** (December 2015)

At any given moment during the year an estimated minimum of 2,000 foreign visitors, having entered the country as tourists, travel throughout Israel and the Palestinian Authority as participants in educational programs and tours whose goal is to export the Palestinian narrative (an account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as told from the Palestinian perspective), to others in communities throughout the world. The majority of these groups have some Christian church affiliation. These include North American, British and European mainstream churches, Quakers and Mennonites, assorted smaller, independent congregations and activist groups such as Christian Peacemakers, Sabeel, Siraj and Holy Land Trust that are based locally or have local offices. A lesser number are affiliated with sundry secular human rights and social justice organizations.

Participants in these programs return home as enthusiastic quasi-ambassadors of the Palestinians where they share their emotional experiences among their social circles, to church groups, on campuses and at community events. Each group, unwittingly or otherwise, serves as a cadre for instilling or further contributing to a one-sided view of the conflict. This longstanding practice constitutes a highly successful, grass-roots effort at building a community of overseas supporters, rank-and-file and elites alike.

This author regularly meets with many such groups as an independent spokesperson and Israel advocate where he lives in Efrat, a Jewish community of 10,000 residents located some 15 minutes south of Jerusalem and situated beyond the 1949 armistice line. For the purposes of the organizers of these programs, this renders Efrat an example of an “illegal settlement.” These groups come to Efrat ostensibly to hear a presentation from the “other side,” the “settlers’ side,” followed by Q & A. The visits, typically an hour-and-a-half in length, do not even come close to balancing the time these groups spend with Palestinians and with Israelis from the far-left.

Given the overt pro-Palestinian bent of these programs, why visit an “illegal settlement” at all? Over time, four reasons have emerged. First, the visit to

Efrat adds a dramatic element to the group's experience by bringing them into the very heart of the controversy, for some, into the "belly of the beast." Second, it is an opportunity for participants to record observations and take photographs of "settlement life" to be used later in blogs, on websites, in public speeches, and in emails. Third, it presents an opportunity for the participants to virtually "interrogate" a "settler" about what they perceive as the injustices heaped upon the Palestinians in order to support the "settlement" enterprise. Four, even a short visit makes it possible to pay lip service to the "we listened to both sides" mantra.

In a recent communication with the author a Quaker correspondent, who recently visited Efrat with a group of Quaker activists from England, strongly expressed his views on the Israel-Palestinian conflict.[\[1\]](#) His perspective, particularly his allegations concerning the sorrowful condition of Palestinians for which he blames the state of Israel, and particularly "settlers," is characteristic of these groups. Although the correspondent sounds sincere, he reveals an open bias favoring the Palestinian narrative, but one that is based on (1) historical ignorance, (2) false premises and (3) factual errors.

The views expressed by this writer are also consistent with those of the Quaker Movement.[\[2\]](#),[\[3\]](#) The Quakers are originally a 17th century British Protestant sect whose members reject all church sacraments and hierarchy. The movement is known for its strong pacifist tradition from which follows its history of anti-war activities. Like other Christian groups, the Quakers were represented by missionaries in the Middle-East, in their case as far back as the 1860s with centers in the Holy Land and Lebanon.

Following Israel's War of Independence in 1948, what Quaker literature refers to as "The First Arab-Israeli War and Nakba," the Arabic term for "disaster," the Quaker Movement played a major role in providing relief to Arabs in the Gaza Strip, creating medical clinics, schools and vocational programs. This work was turned over to the United Nations in 1950. Since the takeover of the Gaza Strip by the Hamas terrorist organization in 2007, Quaker activities there have been limited. Their Middle-East Regional Office is located in East Jerusalem, and Ramallah remains the location of additional offices, as well as a Quaker meetinghouse (church) and two schools.

The Quaker Movement has never looked favorably upon the Jewish return to

sovereignty in the Land of Israel, basing its opposition upon “replacement theology” that sees the local Christian Arabs as the true inheritors of the land. However, the Movement’s opposition to Israel grew significantly more active following the latter’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War (the “War of 1967” according to Quakers), when Israel suddenly found itself in control of the Sinai desert, including the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the West Bank. Since that time Quakers have adopted an openly hostile posture that is reflected in their strong activism against organized Jewish community life in Judea, Samaria and the eastern section of Jerusalem.

In recent years the Quakers, through its American affiliate the American Friends Services Committee (AFSC), have become one of the leading organizations behind the anti-Israel “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement.” The AFSC honored Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a dinner in New York in 2008 despite his professed anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial and threats to destroy the state of Israel. According to Romirowsky and Joffe, “The group now engages in apologetics for anti-Israel terrorism, accuses the Jewish state of all manner of crimes, and seeks to actively undermine its economy and security.”

If this Quaker correspondent follows the pattern of previous visitors, his communication below will prove to be a one-time affair. After using their correspondence to more fully vent their opinions and emotions, other visitors have been either unwilling or unable to challenge the point-by-point refutation that is returned.

The visits to Efrat and other Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria described above take place with the full knowledge of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Israel Ministry of Tourism. Under Israeli laws that protect freedom of speech, these visits, although ultimately damaging to the state of Israel, are not illegal. However, Israel’s Knesset is currently considering legislation according to which “anyone who is not an Israeli citizen or a permanent resident will not be granted any kind of visa or permit if they, or any company, organization or foundation they represent, calls for a boycott of Israel.” There is a possibility that in the future Quaker and other overtly pro-Palestinian groups known to support the BDS Movement will be barred by the government from visiting both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

In the meantime, as evident from this correspondence, the ongoing propaganda tours by Quakers and other groups, even those that include a brief stopover in a "Jewish settlement to hear the other side," only strengthen visitors' identification with the Palestinian narrative.

November 20, 2015

Dear Friend,

I deeply appreciate your taking the time to relate to my recent correspondence with your colleague and for your sincere and thoughtful observations. I apologize for the delay in returning to you as I wanted time to think through your comments and about how I would respond.

Allow me, please, to place my remarks inter-linearly, below. (Yours in italics.)

You wrote:

November 12, 2015

"Dear Ardie"

"I read with interest your reply to Alice and would like to clarify a few things and make some comments of my own."

"Firstly I would personally accept that Israel has a special meaning for Jews and I have no problem with the right of Jews to return to live in Israel. However as it says in the Balfour Agreement 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine'."

I am pleased that you personally, even if not the Quaker Movement, recognizes the "special meaning" of Israel to the Jewish People. That statement, of course, implies nothing regarding the *right* of the Jewish People to claim sovereignty today at least over a portion of the Land of Israel's variously described biblical areas.

Both the document you quote, the Balfour Declaration (1917), and particularly the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine (1922), specifically recognize we Jews as a people, not as a religion, who bear a legitimate historical claim to

the Land of Israel as our homeland.

Fifty-one member countries – the entire League of Nations – unanimously voted to approve the British Mandate for Palestine on 24 July. The Mandate granted the Jewish People the irrevocable right to settle anywhere in Palestine. That decision constitutes international law (that was pushed aside or ignored in the following years for reasons of political expediency in collusion with the Hashemi family of Arabia [“perfidious Albion”?]), legislation that has been neither modified nor rescinded to this day.

Had events taken a different turn, had Britain not reneged on its commitment to the Jewish People, today Israel might very well be living peacefully side-by-side with a state for the Arabs of Palestine that now occupies a territory known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. If there is, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, a Palestinian state today, that is it.

The political rights of the Jewish People expressed in the British Mandate were transferred to the founding charter of the United Nations in 1948. Article 80 of the UN Charter recognizes the Mandate for Palestine of the League of Nations.

You emphasize the clause: *‘nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine’*.

As I am sure you are aware, Palestine was not at that time, nor had it ever been in history a sovereign country; the name “Palestine” never held legal status in international relations. In fact, “Syria-Palestina” was one of the Turkish Ottoman Empire’s most under-populated geographic areas, a fact confirmed in the 19th century by sojourners to the area including authors Mark Twain and Herman Melville, as well as travelers Sarah Rogers Haight, David F. Dorr, Elizabeth Cabot Kirkland, James Cooley and others who recorded their observations in their diaries.

According to historian Ruth Kark, “The middle of the nineteenth century in Palestine marked the end of a quarter of a millennium of neglect and decline. Around 1800 Palestine was a backward province of the Ottoman Empire, largely rural and sparsely populated. Both rural and urban economies were traditional and poor. From about 1850, a process of change began which led to a resurgence and development of the country.” (*Journal of Historical Geography*,

10.4, 1984)

That change was the gradual immigration of Europeans, first some Christians, but then mainly Jews, to Palestine. This new population imported techniques and technologies, particularly in the areas of health care and agriculture, as well as economic methods that were unknown to the region. Yes, the Balfour Declaration cautioned that the resettlement of Jews in Palestine should do nothing *"which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."* Please remember that throughout the period of the British Mandate, we Jews were in no position to "prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." All authority in these areas rested in British hands.

It denies historical reality not to acknowledge that the Jews who settled in Mandatory Palestine in response to the call of the Zionist Movement rapidly raised the quality of life for all peoples in the area.

"I think it is the lack of recognition of the rights of non-Jewish communities which most troubles Quakers."

I have no idea to what you are referring here. Since it was established in May 1948, the state of Israel scrupulously guards the full civil and religious rights of all of its citizens, irrespective of personal background or group affiliation. There is ample evidence of this throughout our highly pluralistic society. Sadly, Israel is the only country in the region about which this may be said.

Yet, having said this, I ask, does Israeli society suffer from social and racial prejudice? Of course it does. I challenge you to identify one country in the world that is free of social and racial prejudice. However, social or racial prejudice within a population should not be conflated with institutionalized discrimination and racism. Such discrimination, in the form of vile antisemitism and persecution of Christians, characterizes the societies of most of our neighboring states. How strongly and how regularly do Quakers condemn the prejudice against *both* Jewish and Christian civil rights in Muslim countries? I repeat. How strongly? How regularly?

"In Israel/Palestine we know there is violence on both sides."

With all due respect, this pat statement suggests nothing more than a broken moral compass. I struggle with its blitheness. Palestinian Muslim society cultivates wanton murderers who take great pride in ending the lives of innocent Israeli Jews, men, women and children. This is no slur on my part. It is a readily corroborated fact born out on social media. Official Palestinian Authority websites, as well as many other websites of Palestinian origin, openly incite violence against Jews and praise terrorist murders. Palestinians regularly hand out candy in the streets following a "successful operation" in which one or more Jews were murdered. They danced on their rooftops when Saddam Hussein attacked Tel-Aviv with Scud missiles in 1991 and when terrorists brought down New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 resulting in the murder of nearly 3,000 innocent people. It is impossible to ignore the myriad public places in the Palestinian Authority, schools, streets, squares, sports arenas, community centers, and the like, upon which are bestowed the name of dead terrorists. Such a practice is anathema to Israeli society. Moreover, the PA provides ongoing financial support to the families of dead and imprisoned terrorists.

Yes, Israeli society over the years has had to contend with its own relatively few cases of home grown terrorists. (Perhaps you as a Quaker consider every soldier a terrorist and every form of physical self-defense an act of terrorism. I have heard this sentiment expressed in the past by other pacifists.) In contrast, violence as a means of social control, retribution and as a political tactic is unfortunately all too characteristic of much of (I do not say all of) Palestinian society. Social justice and human rights groups that refuse to recognize this, that do not vigorously condemn this, and who even equate this pathological, self-defeating ethos with the character of democratic Israel, not only egregiously err, but serve to abet this far too brutal culture.

"On the Palestine side we condemn the violence of the stone throwers and knife attacks – although we have to say we did not witness any such attacks."

Does the fact that no one in your group happened to witness such attacks during their visit bear relevance? Just yesterday, perhaps you heard, two Israeli Jews were stabbed to death by a Palestinian terrorist at a small, make-shift synagogue in Tel-Aviv in the midst of afternoon prayers at about 1:00 p.m. Later, at about 4:30 p.m., not five minutes from our home, a group of Palestinian terrorists drove past a line of vehicles stuck in a traffic jam,

shooting into them at point blank range with an automatic weapon as they went along. Three innocent people were murdered in this incident, two Jews and one Arab. Five others were shot and wounded, many more severely traumatized.

These wanton acts of murder by Palestinians, two and three per day, have been taking place almost daily for the last month. Perhaps your group was just in the right place at the right time to avoid becoming victims. Among yesterday's dead was an 18-year old American tourist. You were tourists.

"What we did witness was the kind of violence which does not feature in most news reports. This is the restrictions on every day travel by the road blocks, the need for permits for Palestinians and the prohibition on using certain roads, the restriction of water supply to 1 day a week, the seizing and demolition of property – in other words the daily grinding humiliation of most Palestinian people which cannot be justified in terms of protecting Israel."

Martin, this paragraph troubles me on two accounts. I am a native (American) English speaker who, rather immodestly, prides himself on his vocabulary. That is why I don't understand employing the word "violence" in this context. The Oxford Dictionaries definition of "violence" is – "Behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or somethin" Is your choice of this word but a rhetorical ploy; an effort to instill your narrative with pathos? What then mostly follows, *travel restrictions, permits, water restrictions*, may be grossly unpleasant, but certainly are not examples of anything remotely "violent." Why mischaracterize an already complex situation...if not to obfuscate it?

But I call into question your very list. Not only are most of these examples not "violent," but you present them sans historical context and even exaggerate them. The daily murders we are currently experiencing, similar to the murders that we experienced in the previous decade during the Second Intifada, and the decade before that in the First Intifada, and the random acts of Palestinian terror in the decade before that and the decade before that and the decade before that, brought us to the conclusion that, as much as we detest restricting others' freedom of travel, we prefer living. Some of the means we employ for the purpose of self-preservation impede the freedoms of Palestinians. That is truly unfortunate for the innocent Palestinians; however, this consequence also serves the interests of our enemies. Even our passive defensive means bring much

criticism upon us from the outside, your own view serving as a case in point. But missing in these critiques is an appreciation for the history of events, the reasoned cause and effect. Palestinian terror against Israeli Jews chronologically precedes any travel restrictions, permits and road blocks. Until September 1987 and the beginning of the First Intifada, Palestinians entered Israel and traveled throughout our cities quite freely. The immense relevance of this fact is inevitably lost to those who come to the area on short visits with little or no historical perspective and limit their attention to the Palestinian narrative.

The water issue that you raise is undoubtedly one of the most successful Palestinian calumnies. It rivals the medieval era accusation that the Jews poisoned the wells of Europe in order to instigate the Black Plague. Every government of Israel since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, including this one, has exceeded its commitment to the Palestinian Authority for supplying water. By way of contrast, in addition to their mismanaging and even absconding with millions of dollars provided by European and other governments earmarked to improve antiquated water delivery and sewerage systems causing much water to be lost to seepage and wasted, Palestinian leaders have never implemented water conservation methods (so common in Israel) and continue to ignore the illegal drilling by Palestinian pirates into wells whose depletion help pollute the water table. I am definitely not an expert on this technical topic, so I can only refer you to some articles whose authors know more than me:

["Socio-Environmental Cooperation and Conflict? A Discursive Understanding and Its Application to the Case of Israel/Palestine"](#) by T. Ide and C. Frohlich, *Earth System Dynamics*

["Can Israel Solve The World's Water Crisis?"](#) *Israel21c*

["https://www.facebook.com/MyIsrael/videos/1027879307230596/?pnref=story"](https://www.facebook.com/MyIsrael/videos/1027879307230596/?pnref=story)

I cannot but help notice the hundreds of Palestinian Arabs, mostly from East Jerusalem, but some, I am sure, from nearby towns and villages, shopping at Jerusalem's fanciest mall (and other Jerusalem malls) in some of its most expensive shops. And the mobile phone centers in Jerusalem are filled with Arab customers, again, some who are Arab Israelis, some Palestinians, in search of the best deal on the latest, most sophisticated cell phones. This lifestyle

hardly qualifies as *daily grinding humiliation*. Really, why the mischaracterization if it isn't true?

"As you say Quakers are noted for our pacifism. Pacifism is not just opposing war – it means actively opposing violence and injustice in all forms using non-violent means. Pacifism is not the same as neutrality. We are not neutral in the face of what we see as injustice as our support for marginalised people all over the world shows. I hope you can see that it is difficult to remain neutral in view the reality of what we experienced in the West Bank. I appreciate your offer of a longer stay in your settlement but I cannot see how this would change this reality."

What you experienced in the West Bank is exactly what some people wished you to experience in the *West Bank*. A longer stay in our "settlement," for which you are still invited, would likely induce in you a cognitive dissonance experience, bringing you to question some of the "truths" you witnessed during your previous visit. This can be quite "unsettling" (pardon the pun). It has been the experience of others who came to spend some time in Efrat after first being hosted for anywhere from a few days to a few weeks by Palestinian families in Beit Sahour or Bethlehem. I agree with you, however, that such a stay would not *change this reality*. My contention is only that *this reality* is not as "real" as you and others are regularly led to believe.

"I hesitate to offer any comments on a way forward based on such a short visit but it seems to me what is missing from politicians on both sides is a vision for a sustainable and fair way forward. Throwing stones and building walls are not a long term solutions. It seems to me that the most promising solution would be based on the lines of a one state solution but where Jews and non-Jews would be treated as citizens with equal rights in terms of property, travel etc. I realise the immense challenges of such a solution from both sides. Many Palestinian politicians would insist on a separate country but many ordinary Palestinians we spoke to seemed to be more interested in living their lives without the continuous daily restrictions than having a country called Palestine. Also I find difficulty in seeing how the West Bank and Gaza could exist as a viable country even if Israel withdrew from all its settlements."

With respect to what *many ordinary Palestinians* are interested in, I commend to you this very recent article by Daniel Polisar:

<http://www.romirowsky.com/18076/quakers-israel>).

The Quakers, through their historical disagreement with the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in the Land of Israel have sidelined themselves as useful players. The charitable and educational work carried out by the movement in Ramallah and elsewhere among Palestinians is commendable. However, the Quaker community's open partisanship in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its aggressive involvement in the BDS Movement has sullied its pacifism and squandered any role it might have had in helping to bring the two sides of the seemingly interminable conflict closer together. Its refusal to acknowledge the whole of Palestinian society and to call out what is wrong, what is in desperate need of fixing, sadly and ironically renders it a passive ("pacifist") accomplice to the very violence it abjures.

Nonetheless, I truly look forward to seeing you and other Quakers again in Efrat.

[1] This correspondent voluntarily chose to write to the author after being copied on a previous correspondence between the author and another group participant.

[2] [Asaf Romirowsky and Alexander H. Joffe](#), "When Did the Quakers Stop Being Friends?", <http://www.thetower.org/article/quakers-stop-friends/>, Issue #9, December 2013

[3] Alexander H. Joffe and Asaf Romirowsky, "The Quaker War on Israel," *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 2015

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