

WASHINGTON REPORT

On Middle East Affairs

Ambassador Afif Safieh, the Palestinian general delegate to the United Kingdom and the Holy See, spoke at a May 6 Holy Land Foundation (HLF) dinner at the Franciscan Monastery Commissariat of the Holy Land, in Washington, DC. Dinner speakers sought to focus the attention of Christians in the West on the grave problems their Palestinian co-religionists must overcome in the Holy Land today to enable them to remain in the land of their ancestors.

That is also the mission of the Holy Land Foundation, according to its president, the Rev. Peter F. Vasko, OFM. The HLF is a worldwide ecumenical Christian organization founded in 1994 to preserve the Christian presence in the Holy Land with

formal support from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches worldwide. Reverend Vasko introduced Ambassador Safieh, who was involved in the 1988 Stockholm negotiations that led to the official and direct American-Palestinian dialogue, and who is also author of *Children of a Lesser God?*, *The Peace Process: From Breakthrough to Breakdown?*, *Self Determination* and *One People Too Many?*

Palestinian Christians have been leaving the Holy Land for some time, Safieh said, ever since "we Palestinians became victims of the victims of European history." Safieh described the "hemorrhage after the violent birth of Israel in 1948," and the ethnic cleansing that first began at

that time. Another wave of Palestinians fled in 1967, and those who were abroad studying (as was Safieh) or just traveling at the time were not permitted to return.

Severe political and economic hardships are even now causing an estimated 500 Christians to leave the Holy Land each year. There are only 160,000 Christians remaining there, and it is quite possible that the Christian church may cease to exist in the Holy Land without help from Christians around the world who, by and large, don't know about the hardships faced by Palestinian Christians in the birthplace of their religion. While the average Israeli income is \$22,000 to \$23,000 per year, the average Palestinian only earns \$4,000 to 6,000 per year. Politically motivated closures of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel have cost those living within the Palestinian territories millions of dollars in revenue every day because Israel controls all borders, preventing imports and exports. Forced closures and travel restrictions have also prevented Palestinian workers living in the occupied territories from getting to jobs in Israel, resulting in high unemployment and eventual replacement of Palestinian workers with foreigners.

In addition to the economic harassment and travel restrictions Palestinians face under Israeli occupation, Safieh said, they also face daily humiliations when "they are confronted by 18-year-olds with tommy guns." As for Palestinian Christians living within Palestinian Authority-governed areas, Safieh said that they are always treated fairly. In fact, he said, there is an over-representation of Christians in parliament and, of the four major cities with a Christian presence, there will always be a Christian



PHOTO BY R. SONTAG

(l-r) Back Row: Gen. & Mrs. Guntmar Heck, Military Attaché of Austria, Msgr. M. Bransfield, Dir. of Immaculate Conception Shrine, Rev. Giovanni Battistelli, OFM Franciscan Custos of Holy Land, HIH Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie, Bishop Nevins, Mr. & Mrs. William Guyol of St. Louis, Mr. Anthony Sansone of St. Louis, (l-r) Front Row: His Excellency Afif Safieh, and Fr. Abdel-Masih Fayez-Fahim.

mayor, even though demographics are changing.

Safieh expressed his increasing disenchantment with the open-ended peace process and said, "We're having a lasting peace process, but what is lasting is the process and not the peace that is so desirable."

He wondered why it is taking so long to return the land captured by Israel in the 1967 war. "What was occupied in six days can be evacuated in six days, so we can rest on the seventh!" he said. "Palestinian demands are unreasonably reasonable. We're asking for 22 percent of what was legitimately ours in the beginning of the century. We offer 100 percent peace for 100 percent of the land occupied in 1967." Safieh went on to say the existence of Israel is no longer at stake, what with its nuclear monopoly, and aviation powers equal to the French plus the British combined (and with more chance to practice, in Lebanon). In addition, Safieh said, Israel has an unwritten alliance with the U.S. that is even better than a written alliance that requires proper behavior from a junior partner. He explained that an unwritten alliance means Israel can be an undisciplined ally and use its lobby to get financial, political and moral support.

With regard to what kind of an American president is required to help forge

peace between Israel and its neighbors, Safieh said "the president should have the ethics of former President Jimmy Carter, the popularity of Ronald Reagan in order to combat the lobby, and the strategic audacity of Richard Nixon."

Meanwhile Israeli settlements, built on land confiscated from Palestinian Christians and Muslims, are rapidly expanding, forging a ring around East Jerusalem and Bethlehem and pre-empting the natural growth of those cities. Christian tourism will soon suffocate as Israel plans to build more and more hotels which will kill the Palestinian hotel business. Safieh said Israel even has a project to build a new "old Bethlehem" so tourists can bypass the real "Little Town of Bethlehem."

Israel is also putting the squeeze on church-owned lands. Over the centuries Franciscans have acquired tracts of land in the Holy Land, but now Franciscans are under pressure to build on these lands or they will be confiscated by Israel's annexation program. The HLF is using this land and creating new housing for Christians who are contemplating leaving the Holy Land because of critical housing, education and employment shortages. Within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, the Franciscan Custody's Community Development program has built more than 300 apartments. Two complexes have been

completed in Beit-Hanina, Bethany, and Ram. The initial goal of the HLF is to raise \$30 million to fund training and job opportunities, provide academic scholarships, and build 194 subsidized housing units in Bethpage, Jericho, Beit-Hanina, Nazareth and Bethlehem. Safieh asked Christians to support this vital work financially and also to try to meet the local communities, or the "Living Stones," when they visit the Holy Land.

He reminded the audience that the pope was one of the first leaders to recognize the Palestinians' right to a state. "The Palestinian state is the right of the Palestinian people in addition to being the moral duty of Jews and Israelis toward us, the Palestinians," Safieh said, "because they know the human price we Palestinians have had to pay individually and collectively for the birth of Israel. Now we must struggle for the size and viability of that state." Safieh concluded, "One day Palestine will have a resurrection. We in Jerusalem have had previous experience with resurrections."

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– Delinda C. Hanley