

Middle East Notes
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
December 20, 2012



[Read previous weeks' Middle East Notes](#)

Please note: Opinions expressed in the following articles do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

This week's Middle East Notes gives data and reflections on continuing Israeli settlement construction, growing recognition of Hamas in Gaza, the UN decision to give Palestine the same non-member observer status as the Vatican, and access to a short video explaining the Israel-Palestine conflict. Artwork above is by the anonymous graffiti artist Banksy.

During these darkest days of the year, we mourn the persistent pain and suffering of God's creation, most recently the victims of the terrible shooting in Newtown, CT. We pray that we continue to answer the call to be the light of the world, to work together for peace, justice and hope, not only now at Christmas and in the new year to come, but for our lifetimes.

- **Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) Bulletins for December 8 and 14:** The most recent Bulletins explore the meaning of the E1 settlement construction to the viability of the two-state solution; U.S. response to this planned construction; the visit to Gaza of Hamas' leader; and other issues.
- **Holy Land Christian Ecumenical News, December 2012:** Palestinian church leaders share their views on the UN decision to grant Palestine the status of a "nonmember observer state."
- **Foundation for Middle East Peace** November-December Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories.
- **Video: "Israel and Palestine: A very short introduction":** Jewish Voice for Peace has made a six minute video on the Israel-Palestine conflict.
- **Abbas thanks Pope for supporting Palestinian UN bid:** Ha'aretz publishes a story from Reuters and Associated Press on the recent visit of Mahmoud Abbas to Pope Benedict XVI during which the Vatican expressed support for the UN vote giving the same status to Palestine as to the Vatican State.

**1) [Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin](#)
December 8, 2012**

Background on E1: Shortly after the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly on November 29 to upgrade the Palestinian mission to a "non-member observer state," Israel announced plans for more settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The government of Israel issued a call for companies to submit proposals for 3,000 new housing units in the West Bank while also advancing plans for 5,310 units in East Jerusalem and 3,426 in a controversial area called E1. While every announcement comes with protest from the international community this one has many diplomats and experts saying that Benjamin Netanyahu's government has gone too far.

The uproar centers on the E1 area. E1 or East-1 refers to the stretch of land between Jerusalem's eastern municipal boundary and the settlement Ma'ale Adumim that covers 4.6

square miles. The main artery between the northern and southern West Bank runs through the area.

E1 is part of the West Bank. The Israeli government has never annexed it into Israel and has kept it under Israeli military rule since 1967. Plans for E1 have existed since 1994 with the Israeli government and settlers eyeing the land for an expansion of Ma'ale Adumim. Many Israelis consider Ma'ale Adumim a suburb of Jerusalem since it is only a ten-minute drive from the city. However, it lies east of the 1967 lines and is therefore considered West Bank settlement.

Jerusalem lawyer and anti-settlement activist Daniel Seidemann says that before the announcement, the government has issued tenders for the construction of 2,366 housing units in 2012, more than twice the number built in the previous three years combined. With the flurry of building this year, why has the reaction to the E1 announcement caused more outrage than usual?

To understand the impact building in E1 will have on a two-state solution, one must look at a map. Connecting Ma'ale Adumim with Jerusalem divides the West Bank into two parts. It would make contiguity impossible by cutting off Bethlehem and Ramallah from East Jerusalem, the aspirational capital of a Palestinian state. It also bisects the quickest route between Ramallah and Bethlehem, a distance of only about 14 miles. This would force Palestinians to circumvent Ma'ale Adumim, making the trip significantly longer.

Widespread condemnation: Many two-state solution advocates say that building in E1 makes a viable Palestinian state impossible. This week, a wide range of voices came out against the announcement.

“This move is a dagger aimed at the heart of a future Palestinian state – and therefore at the two-state solution. It is also a slap in the face to the international community, the United States and the overwhelming majority of American Jews who long to see Israel living at peace with its neighbors... This is not a routine settlement-construction announcement... Construction in this area could ultimately result in the loss of Israel as a Jewish and democratic homeland.” – J Street

“Construction in E-1 could be fatal for the two-state solution ... The economic, political and social heart of the future Palestinian state is in East Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem. This plan prevents the possibility to develop the center of the Palestinian state and isolates East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank. In other words, we cannot reach an agreement on two states for two peoples if a giant Israeli settlement is built in E1, unless that settlement is evacuated.” – Peace Now's settlement report

“Indeed, E1 is not a ‘routine’ settlement. If built, it is a game-changer, maybe a game-ender. E1 is the ‘binary’ settlement. If you support E1, you cannot possibly be in favor of the two-state solution; if you are in favor of the two-state solution, you must oppose E1 ... This is not a drill.” – Daniel Seidemann

“If Israel decides to start building in E1 and approves all the settlements in it, we consider it to be an Israeli decision to end the peace process and the two-state solution, which ends any chance of talking about peace in the future.” - Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat

“It’s an indication of Israel’s continuing to stick a thumb in the eye of the Palestinians... I am profoundly disappointed.” – Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)

Additionally, according to the Huffington Post, “International condemnation was harsher than usual, with some of Israel’s closest European allies, including Italy and the European Union on Wednesday, calling in Israeli ambassadors for rebukes or issuing especially stern criticism.”

Israeli explanations: At his weekly cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Netanyahu defended the announcement to the media by saying, “We are building and we will continue to build in Jerusalem and in all areas that are on the map of the strategic interests of the state of Israel.”

Some analysts say that creative solutions can be found in the event of a peace deal to ensure “transportational connectivity” between the West Bank and East Jerusalem. A Jerusalem Post editorial says, “And despite claims to the contrary, building in E1 would not necessarily undermine the contiguity of a future Palestinian state. An access road could easily allow Palestinian traffic from the south and north to pass east of Ma’ale Adumim and continue northward or southward.”

The editorial also argues that Ma’ale Adumim and E1 will be a part of Jerusalem in any future peace deal so building on it is not harming a two-state solution. According to the editors, “while in the midst of hammering out the Oslo Accords, then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin declared that a ‘united Jerusalem’ would include Ma’ale Adumim as the capital of Israel... As prime minister in 1996, Shimon Peres reaffirmed the government’s position....in the framework of a permanent peace agreement... And the 2000 Clinton Parameters called for Israel to be compensated for the partitioning of Jerusalem by annexing Ma’ale Adumim.”

Regardless, the Jewish Daily Forward explains, “Supporters say that every Israeli leader since Yitzhak Rabin has expected that the land between Jerusalem and Ma’ale Adumim will remain part of the Jewish State. Granted. But every Israeli leader until Netanyahu hasn’t acted on that sentiment, for good reason. The future of E1 has been and should be subject to negotiation with the Palestinians, not the kind of unilateral action Netanyahu condemns in others... And by saying he’ll send in the bulldozers, Netanyahu is certainly not acting like a man ready to talk.”

U.S. response: Publically, the U.S. government took a more tepid tone than other countries. Jay Carney, White House spokesman told press, “We oppose all unilateral actions” including the recent settlement announcement that “complicates efforts” to restart negotiations.” He urged the Israelis to “exercise restraint” because settlements are “counterproductive.”

Behind the scenes, the timing and magnitude of the announcement has miffed many in the U.S. government. The United States supported Israel’s latest military campaign against Gaza and voted in opposition to the upgrade for the Palestinian UN delegation, both unpopular positions around the world.

Former U.S. negotiator Aaron David Miller attributes the timing to domestic politics in Israel. He says, "What better time to act on settlements? ... Obama may be an empowered second-term president, but he's still constrained on the Hill on the Israel issue; and [Netanyahu] is running for re-election."

Former U.S. ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer has a different take on Netanyahu's motives, telling Ha'aretz that "the administration was angered by a background briefing in which an Israeli official was quoted as saying Israel is not bound by its previous agreement to refrain from building in E1 that the reason was the Obama administration's refusal to reaffirm Bush's 2004 letter."

The 2004 Bush letter to then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the United States recognized that the major settlement blocs would be annexed into Israel under a peace deal and that it is "unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949 [also 1967 lines]." President Obama has not reaffirmed the letter and in May 2011 said, "The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps."

Kurtzer also says that what the announcement "suggests to Washington is that Jerusalem was waiting for an opportunity to do this, that it was designed to provoke anger in the administration, and that they picked what they thought was a convenient moment...It was a low blow."

Update: Amendments to cut PA funding removed: The U.S. Senate removed three amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act (which was passed on Tuesday) to severely reduce or cut entirely vital aid to the Palestinian Authority. CMEP sent a message opposing the amendments to all Senate offices and over 2,000 of supporters took action as well. A big thank you to everyone who made their voices heard!

[Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin](#) **December 14, 2012**

Hamas' Meshal visits Gaza for first time: On Friday, December 7, the long-exiled leader of Hamas, Khaled Meshal, entered Gaza for the first time to celebrate the 25 years since Hamas' founding. Tens of thousands of Gazans showed up to hear him deliver his first speech on Palestinian soil. While the atmosphere in Gaza was jubilant, the occasion made many nervous about the burgeoning power Hamas is acquiring and what this means for peace.

While the official anniversary for Hamas was December 14, officials moved the festivities forward a week to also celebrate Hamas' "victory" against Israel during the latest round of fighting in November. At least 175 Gazans died during the eight day Israeli offensive aimed at stopping rocket fire [emanating] from the coastal enclave. The air strikes resulted in over \$300 million in property damage. Meshal's speech was defiant, insisting, "Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession on any inch of the land."

The New York Times described the content of his speech as reflecting “longstanding Hamas principles rather than new, specific threats toward Israel. But they will only reinforce Israel’s belief that Hamas is its enemy and intends to continue to use military force to reach its goals.” Indeed, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s weekly cabinet meeting he said, “Yesterday we were re-exposed to our enemies’ true face. They have no intention of compromising with us; they want to destroy the state.”

The speech from Meshal did not strike the same tone that he had been hinting towards in recent months and seems like a step backward for a leader who many thought had been slowly inching closer to moderation. In recent statements, the leader raised the possibility of a Palestinian state only in the West Bank and Gaza. He also suggested Hamas may move away from armed resistance and towards non-violent popular resistance. This moderation was absent from his speeches in Gaza.

To understand the militant content in the speech, it is important to understand the current political dynamics in Hamas and Gaza. Much of Hamas’ political structure lives in exile outside of Gaza. The politburo’s main offices were in Damascus until February 2012 when Hamas leaders shut down their offices and announced support for the Syrian opposition. Meshal now lives primarily in Doha. The move caused a shift away from Iran, Hamas’ longtime benefactor, and caused Hamas leaders to turn to other Arab countries, especially in the Gulf, for financial support.

The Hamas members governing on the ground in Gaza operate under the exiled leadership but in recent years tension has emerged between these two groups over reconciliation with Fatah and the importance of armed resistance. Meshal is a proponent of reconciliation and has negotiated agreements with Fatah that have yet to be implemented. While Hamas militants in Gaza fired rockets into Israel in November, Meshal negotiated the truce with Israel via Egypt. American Task Force for Palestine’s Hussein Ibish writes, “The regional calculation remains that the externally-based Politburo will be ultimately restrained by its new regional Arab patrons while local Gaza leaders, at least for now, have a greater interest in conflict.

With this in mind, why did Meshal choose to be so inflammatory in his speech? Ibish believes that Meshal is fighting for his political life as the internal leadership in Gaza moves away from him. Ibish says the speech was so confrontational because “Meshal’s main point was that he’s not going to allow himself to be outbid by an extremist turn by local leaders on the ground: he can be every bit as aggressive and recalcitrant as them and there is no need to look for an alternative leadership.”

The celebration was not limited to Gaza. Hamas members held their first West Bank demonstration since 2007 on December 13. 5,000 supporters marched through Nablus. Over the past five years, the Palestinian Authority security forces have cracked down on Hamas after the group violently took over Gaza but this time it did not interfere. The Associated Press theorized that it could be another sign that relations are thawing between the PA and Hamas. Last month Hamas announced support for the UN bid which was also seen by some as a positive signal for unity. However, after Meshal’s comments Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas disagreed and said, “I don’t agree with Khaled Mashal’s statement on the non-recognition of Israel because we, in fact, recognized it in 1993.” Abbas is referring to the

letters of recognition exchanged between Yassir Arafat and Yitzak Rabin that paved the way for the Oslo Accords.

For his part, Meshal did stress the need for unity, saying, "From Gaza I have stressed the need for reconciliation, and I do so again. Gaza and the West Bank are two dear parts of the greater Palestinian homeland, and they need each other."

Many observers are worried about the growing influence Hamas is having amongst Palestinians in the territories and the Arab world. With negotiations at a standstill, Abbas has little to show for his commitment to non-violence. A growing number of Palestinians on the streets are expressing impatience with the lack of results and are turning to Hamas. The PA's current budget woes are not helping its case either. At a meeting with Israeli peace activists days before the United States election, Abbas warned the group about the consequences of not seeing any improvements on the ground. According to one person present he (paraphrasing) said, "You want to be occupiers? So you occupy? I'm not going to be your shield. I'm not going to do for you the dirty work of keeping the security of Israel from the West Bank and getting nothing in return. Enough is enough. You want to continue and build the Hamas and (its leader, Ismail Haniyeh), do that with pleasure."

Extra reading: Americans for Peace Now's Lara Friedman writes, "It's hard to believe that four years of serial humiliations from Netanyahu haven't already driven this message home. Will this latest UN debacle finally teach the Obama administration that even when it rolls over and sits up on command, it won't get a treat or even a pat on the head from Netanyahu or his fellow travelers in the U.S. and Israel?" She suggests the White House call Bill Clinton or former Secretary of State James Baker for some advice on how to get tougher.

The fifth "price tag" attack on a Christian site this year happened at a Greek Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem where vandals spray-painted offensive language on the stone surrounding the structure. The monastery was also targeted in February. Father Claudio the superior told reporters, "I forgave them the first time, I will forgive them the second time. I will forgive them the seventh, and 75th times, the 77th time I forgive." He also said he knows that 99 percent of Israelis support his church. Netanyahu and the mayor of Jerusalem both strongly condemned the attack. Only two people have been arrested for the crimes against Christian holy sites this year but the police chief promises to pursue the criminals.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that the cash-strapped PA will not see any of the \$100 million in tax revenues Israel collects on its behalf until at least March. He said, "The Palestinians can forget about getting even one cent in the coming four months, and in four months' time we will decide how to proceed." However, on Friday, Lieberman resigned from his post following a "breach of trust" indictment. It is unclear if his resignation will change this policy.

Advent and Christmas 2012 daily reflections: Advent is a time of expectant waiting. We know God is with us. We believe God is with us. Yet, sometimes, especially when we think of the violence, pain, and sorrows of the people of Israel and Palestine, we may not necessarily feel God's presence with us. To help all of us during this season of Advent (December 1 in the Catholic and Protestant calendars) and through Christmas (January 7 in the Orthodox calendar),

CMEP will be sending daily emails to encourage all of us to ponder and pray for peace. If you would like to receive these emails, [please click here](#) and sign up.

2) Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) News

Beyond the UN vote: New futures for Palestine and Israel: On Nov. 29, which marked the 65th anniversary of UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which called for partitioning Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states and a special international regime for the city of Jerusalem, the UN granted Palestine the status of a “nonmember observer state.” [Read more](#)

Bishop Shomali: The houses of the Israeli government in the Occupied Territories is a challenge and a retaliation after the UN vote: “The decision to build 3,000 housing units in East Jerusalem is a retaliation after the recognition of Palestine as a non-member state of the UN. It expresses a clear rejection and a challenge respect to the step taken by the Assembly of the United Nations, as well as representing a kind of outburst, an instinctive reaction.” So says to Fides Agency His Exc. Mgr. William Shomali, Patriarchal Vicar of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. [Read more](#)

Patriarch Fouad Twal: “The UN decision will restore credibility to the government of Abu Mazen. May President Obama remember his speech in Cairo”: Jerusalem - “For once the international community and the leaders of the nations had the courage not to be influenced by the pressures and to decide in conscience, without calculation. I am grateful and happy for this freedom.” Thus, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Exc. Mgr. Fouad Twal, expressed his joy to Fides Agency for the step taken yesterday in New York, where the UN General Assembly approved the recognition of Palestine as a non-member State observer. [Read more.](#)

Archbishop Maroun Lahham: Palestinian Christians support the request to the United Nations by President Abu Mazen: “The churches of the Holy Land in a unanimous manner support the step taken by the Palestinian National Authority. The soul and the prayers of the Christians of Holy Land ask that this step is accomplished.” So Archbishop Maroun Laham, Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, describes to Fides Agency the expectations of the Christian community regarding the request to recognize Palestine as a UN non-member State observer that tomorrow will be submitted to the UN by President Abu Mazen. [Read more.](#)

The words of Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa on the situation in Gaza: We reproduce below the words of Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Custos of the Holy Land and President of ATS pro Terra Sancta, on the situation in Gaza. We have received various requests to express our views on what is happening in Gaza. Honestly, we have not said anything until now, because one does not know what to state any more. [Read more.](#)

Act of vandalism in Syrian church prompts “miracle of reconciliation”: An act of vandalism in the Syrian town of Qara has changed into a story of forgiveness and reconciliation. According to a Fides News Agency report, the sixth century church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, located in the diocese of Homs in Western Syria, was desecrated by vandals on November 19. [Read more.](#)

[Read the entire piece on HCEF’s website.](#)

3) November-December 2012 Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories Foundation for Middle East Peace (FMEP)

The Occupation returns to center stage: Israel rules the West Bank like an obedient province, while it views the Gaza Strip as a hostile state. The result, as Barack Obama administration embarks on the second term, is not the contest framed by Obama's predecessor between a strong, successful model of nation-building in Ramallah and a weak one confined to Gaza, but rather the divide and conquer model established by Israel, defined by a besieged mini-state under Hamas' rule in Gaza and an even more fragile Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

To our readers: It is now clear that the Oslo peace process is bankrupt. The agreement signed in 1995 was meant to create a two-state peace through direct negotiations. But it has foundered under the weight of Israel's massive settlement program, backed by military occupation and designed to prevent a Palestinian state. It also failed because of the huge disparity in power between occupying Israel and occupied Palestine, and America's deference to Israel.

[Read the entire report on FMEP's website.](#)

4) Video: "Israel and Palestine: A very short introduction"

This new video from Jewish Voice for Peace addresses the Israel-Palestine conflict in just six minutes. [Click here to watch.](#) (Link to Jewish Voice for Peace website.)

5) [Abbas thanks Pope for supporting Palestinian UN bid](#)

Reuters and the Associated Press, Dec. 17, 2012

Pope Benedict told Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Monday that the Vatican hoped the recent de facto recognition of Palestinian statehood at the United Nations would spur the international community to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Abbas, who is on a tour of Europe to thank countries that supported the November 29 resolution by the UN General Assembly recognizing Palestine, held private talks with the Pope for about 25 minutes in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace and then met with the Vatican's top diplomats. ...

The 193-nation General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a resolution to upgrade the Palestinian Authority's observer status at the United Nations from "entity" to "non-member state," the same status as the Vatican.

The Vatican welcomed the resolution, which amounted to an implicit recognition of a Palestinian state. But at the time the Holy See also renewed its call for an internationally guaranteed special status for Jerusalem, something which Israel rejects.

The Vatican said the pope and Abbas also discussed the "situation in the region, troubled by numerous conflicts," which was seen as a clear reference to the civil war in Syria. ...