



Report

Jerusalem Project

Working Visit to Jerusalem

September 10 to 23, 2011

In September, the second of this year's two working visits to Jerusalem took place. Two workshops and nineteen meetings with Israelis, Palestinians and representatives of the international community were on the agenda. The most important activities will be presented in this report.

1. Advances in the Project 'Urban Development for East Jerusalem'

Presentation in the office of the International Peace and Cooperation Center (IPCC)

Together with Mario Carera, Senior Advisor for the Middle East in the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), we spent one morning learning about the progress of the IPCC in the project 'Urban Development for East Jerusalem'. The director of the IPCC, Rami Nasrallah, showed us, that six of the thirty-two identified areas have been dealt with in the meantime, four for area planning and two for replanning and an improvement of the legal status of already existing quarters. The demand for housing facilities in East Jerusalem is estimated at 48'000 housing units, with our partner thinking of realising more than 10'000 units over the following ten years. The conditions have never been better, one could even say that the housing project is close to a break-through. Mario Carera sees the possibility of formal assistance of Switzerland for the urban development plans of the IPCC. With that – and with the support of UN-Habitat as well as that of the Quartet on the Middle East, a group consisting of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia – a further step has been taken towards the formation of an international coalition.

Meeting with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

Two years ago, we were already able to bring Rami Nasrallah and the IPCC together with the UNDP. Back then, the UNDP was only working sporadically in East Jerusalem, as no starting-point for a systematic amelioration of the situation could be seen. This has changed. Sufian Mushasha and Nasser Al-Faqih of the UNDP emphasized how happy they are to have found the IPCC, an appropriate partner for systematic urban development in East Jerusalem.

Tour through East Jerusalem

After a late lunch in the garden of the IPCC, Rami Nasrallah led us to two places, where modern districts for Palestinians are supposed to emerge in the future. Al Adasseh, which is part of Beit Hanina in the North of Jerusalem, is an undeveloped hill, where 2'500 housing units are supposed to be constructed. The quarter will be equipped with public infrastructure and an industrial area. Further to the south-east, on the backside of the Mount of Olives, lies the already inhabited Khilet El Ain (At Tur). The IPCC has plans for 3'000 housing units for the quarter. It was impressive to see how Rami Nasrallah made contact with members of the local community. This shows that the plans do not emerge from the drawing board but take into account the interests and wishes of the inhabitants of the respective quarters, in area planning as well as in the replanning of already existing quarters.



2. Promising Encounters

Encounters with Palestinians, Israelis and representatives of the international community are an important part of our stays in Jerusalem. They help us to promote the important local networking by letting us look at the conflict from a new perspective and opening up ways for possible solutions.

Dedicated Palestinian in Sheikh Jarrah

At the border to West Jerusalem, not far from the Old City, lies Sheikh Jarrah, a part of East Jerusalem. There we met Amal Alqasem Abu Hasnah, a woman with a fighting spirit. Inspired by one of her brothers, she does not want to put up with the vacation of numerous houses in her quarter. During the day, she works at the Ministry of Finance in Ramallah. In her spare time, she manages the Women's Forum Sheikh Jarrah. When we asked for her opinion on Israelis, she said that as long as the inequality between Palestinians and Israelis due to the occupation persists, encounters between the two groups would lead to a false impression of normality. Amal tells us how she connects with women from the quarter to talk about the daily challenges and to support each other. The only thing she likes about the demonstrations in Tel Aviv are the tents in the streets. Tents remind her of her own tradition and her own people. She misses any reference to the connection between the high costs of living in Israel and the huge sums of money that are spent because of Israel's settlement policy (extra roads, checkpoints, special security measures, walls) and the military apparatus.

Meeting with Christoph Plate, editor of the „NZZ am Sonntag“

For the last ten years, Christoph Plate, former editor of the "Spiegel", has been working for the "NZZ am Sonntag" as foreign editor, responsible for the Middle East and, since some time, also for Southeast Asia. Therefore, seeing the bigger picture is something Plate is used to. According to him, Israel has a false sense of strength. The power-political situation might soon change if Egypt and Turkey emerge as the new strong powers in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, it is all the more important for Israel to reach a just peace agreement with the Palestinians in time. Due to our very regular stays in Jerusalem, we are able to arrange several contacts for Mr. Plate. On the other hand, we gain a lot of new insights into the situation through him (see his article "Der ewige Showdown" in the "NZZ am Sonntag", October 2, 2011).

Reconciliation from an Islamic point of view

In March 2011, we became acquainted with Mohammed Dajani, professor at the institute for American Studies at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. The founder of the Wasatia Foundation, which stands for a moderate Islam, was happy to see us again. In our conversation, he highlighted the importance of the recognition of the Holocaust for the Palestinians. Distortion of history leads to many Palestinians still denying it to this day. The Palestinians should critically deal with the history of the Jewish extermination in the Third Reich, even if the Israeli side is not ready to acknowledge the suffering of the Palestinians due to the Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe"; for Israelis it is a war of independence). The self-confidence of the Palestinians would grow through understanding the suffering of the Israelis. Asked by the US Embassy in Tel Aviv how he wants to commemorate the attacks on the World Trade Center, Dajani had the idea to create memorial parks in all the Palestinian universities where students, staff and other people could commemorate different events.



Msrg. William Shomali, Auxiliary Bishop to the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

It is often evident that there is a lot of religion in Jerusalem but very little spirituality. When asked about his opinion, Msgr. Shomali readily agreed to that. He adopted the motto for his work, 'Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem', from Psalm 122,6. According to Msrg. Shomali, Christians, Jews and Muslims are called upon to work closer together. A common prayer for rain, which had taken place a couple of weeks earlier, is nowhere near enough in his opinion. More depth is needed. Not only his grasp for the importance of spirituality but also his ability to act became obvious over the course of the conversation. More than 80 housing units for Christian and Muslim Palestinians have been completed thanks to his initiative. Once again, we were able to establish contact with the PCC for area replanning in connection with further projects, another example of our networking activities.

Meeting with Assaf Gavron, writer from Tel Aviv

The award-winning writer and book author attracted our attention with an article from August 9, 2011, in the „Süddeutsche Zeitung“, which had been translated into German. In this article, he analysed the social movement that had started in July with a female student from Tel Aviv. During our conversation in a café in Tel Aviv, Assaf Gavron stressed that he does not see himself as political but that the uprising of the young people had been so powerful that, in the end, he had wanted to make a contribution as well. In his opinion, the protests had been an important step towards Israel's society regaining its voice. He did not rule out that parts of the movement will put the relationship with the Palestinians on the agenda. At the moment, the movement is losing steam but could, depending on the reaction of the Netanyahu government, build momentum once again. For now, the tent cities in the centre are vanishing. However, behind the scenes the talks are continuing. We learnt from Avner Haramati that the model "1000 round tables" became concrete through him and his wife Sarah. All over Israel, groups consisting of ten persons met for talks and connected via Social Network (internet) with the other thousand circles. In this way, the central issue of the demonstrations, more social justice, was further developed and had a lasting effect.

3. Workshops

The core competency of the Lassalle-Institut lies in interreligious and intercultural dialogue. We had already been able to find suitable partners for realizing such workshops in Jerusalem in March. For a start, the workshops only took place with Israeli participants. In the future, however, we would like to work together with Christian and Muslim Palestinians as well.

Workshop 'Partnership of Man and Woman'

Pia Gyger and Niklaus Brantschen held a workshop with the title 'Partnership of Man and Woman', which was organized by the couple Avner and Sarah Haramati. Avner Haramati is chairman of the Jerusalem Inter-Cultural Center, Sarah Haramati works as a psychotherapist. The workshop took place on a small scale, with five Israeli couples. The heart of the workshop was the Jerusalem-Ritual, which had been specifically adjusted for couples. It turned out that the couples were able to let themselves in for the subject matter. We can imagine repeating workshops of this kind in the future.

Workshop 'A Special Day in Jerusalem'

We organized "A Special Day in Jerusalem" together with the couple Baruch and Shelagh Shalev. Around 20 Israelis, peace activists and committed people from the political center, got together in the morning of September 18. We created an atmosphere of safety through meditation and deep relaxation, so that the participants were ready to listen to each other and to open up. On the basis of the «Lassalle-Institut-Modell»®, we discussed the possibilities of experiencing unity, diversity, and uniqueness in Jerusalem, despite the difficult circumstances. The workshop encouraged everyone not to be worn down by the conflict in their daily lives.



Evaluation of the workshops

From our point of view, the workshops were very successful. The participants too gave predominantly positive feedback. Further events are planned for the future. At the beginning of next year, a two-day workshop in the desert with Baruch and Shelagh Shalev is supposed to take place. Furthermore, we would like to offer seminars for Muslims and Christians. For this, a collaboration with Prof. Mohammed Dajani and auxiliary bishop Shomali is conceivable. Should we manage to educate people from all three different abrahamic religions, then we could, as a next step, bring them together in a workshop.

4. The Controversy over Palestine's Application for UN Membership

The request by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas for admittance to the UN on September 23, 2011, was omnipresent during our stay. It was discussed controversially. There is no alternative to a bilateral peace agreement mediated by the US government. That is what we heard again and again from statesmen and stateswomen, Israelis and Palestinians. So what was the point of unilaterally approaching the UN?

The supporters claim that the UN General Assembly is the only place where the whole of mankind gets together. Through the application by the Palestinians, all states are forced to deal with their complicated situation. The Palestinians would finally feel that they are heard. And it is true: during the speech of president Mahmud Abbas at the UN, thousands of Palestinians of every age were celebrating their president in Ramallah, Bethlehem and elsewhere.

However, and even a lot of Palestinians agree to that, what change does it make to the concrete situation at the end of the day? None at all. The occupation remains and with it the checkpoints, the harassments. In case of a rejection in the UN Security Council, which can be assumed as certain if there is a vote, there is even the threat of violent riots between Palestinians and Israel's security forces. No sign of normalization. Only the status of the Palestinians in regard to the UN, from an observer status to that of a non-member state without voting rights, should bring certain advantages. In the end, the advantages for the Palestinians are more of symbolic nature and thus intangible and hardly measurable. But they do exist. And symbols are, especially when it comes to politics, highly relevant.

Bad Schönbrunn, October 13, 2011

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