

Israel killed many good Palestinians who could've been Gandhis

by
Naim Ateek

The author of 'A Palestinian Theology of Liberation' believes non-violent resistance is a rocky but powerful road to freedom. Eighty-one-year-old Palestinian priest Naim Ateek the co-founder of the Jerusalem-based Palestinian Christian organisation Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, says that he knew about his "calling" to be an Anglican priest ever since childhood. He became canon at St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem in 1985, just two years before the first *Intifada* (uprising) started. "We need a new non-violent intifada," says Reverend Ateek, a key player in the development of Palestinian liberation theology.

It was in meetings after Sunday services with his congregation and discussions about reconciling their Christian faith with the realities of the Israeli occupation, that he developed his unique Palestinian take on liberation theology, a movement which originally began in Latin America in the late 1960s and 1970s, in response to poverty and oppression.

While liberation theology in Latin America was mainly about battling poverty, he explains, and in South Africa it was about ending apartheid, it is always about non-violent solutions. "In our situation, it has to do with the *Nakba* and with the '67 occupation. But everywhere, liberation theology is about ending oppression and seeking out just, non-violent solutions." In spite of his personal hardships, Reverend Ateek's message and the theme in his new book is about rejecting violence, promoting justice, and encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation.

Non-violent resistance across Palestine

On the sidelines of his book tour in Canada, the father of three speaks of young people taking part in the the 46day Great Return March protests in Gaza, calling for Palestinian refugees' right to return to their former homes now inside Israel. "Their movement needs to spread throughout Palestine and also to Palestinian citizens of Israel ... I believe that this protest movement needs to continue non-violently. What's happening in Gaza needs to happen in the West Bank and in Jerusalem," says the veteran activist.

But Reverend Ateek, a man whose slight stature and grandfatherly demeanour belie an incredible determination and commitment to the liberation of his people, is not naïve about the possible consequences of such actions.

"If this started in Jerusalem," where he says the Israeli government is trying to "empty the Palestinian presence, the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) would kill protesters immediately".

He still cautions that any revenge on the Palestinians' part would only harm the Palestinian cause. "We should not try to kill back in revenge," he says, as violence only serves to "discredit" the Palestinian cause, and is a "losing battle" against the military power of the Israeli state. The non-violent struggle, he contends, is a powerful communication tool. "People's eyes need to be opened to the reality of occupation," he says. "Unfortunately what's happening in Gaza is hidden from major media in the US – but thank God for the internet."

When asked whether the sacrifice of protesters for their cause is too heavy a price to pay, he says sanguinely: "We are getting killed anyway. Almost every Friday people protest after noon prayers across Palestine and are attacked by the IDF."

Still, Reverend Ateek says, “I’d rather see that than a knife attack against a soldier by a frustrated young person.” Citing the work of Martin Luther King – an influence on Melkite Archbishop Joseph Raya, one of the pioneers of Palestinian Liberation Theology who worked with Doctor King for many years - and his famous quote “the arc of history bends towards justice,” Reverend Ateek says there is a cost to non-violence. “We need to accept the cost of nonviolence. It will yield rewards and it’s the right thing to do. The world will take notice of our cause.”

Challenging the Christian Zionist narrative

While Reverend Ateek sees progress already being made in Europe, his new book addresses the heartland of America, whose billions fund the occupation of his homeland, and in particular, the Christian Zionists who he says support President Donald Trump and offer unquestioning support for Israel.

The United States has been giving Israel \$38 billion in a 10-year military assistance package signed off by President Obama in 2016 the largest such aid package in US history, and there have been calls by some US senators to increase.

A Palestinian Theology of Liberation sets out to prove that the fundamentalist interpretation of the Old Testament that serves to justify ongoing occupation is an incorrect reading of the Bible.

In his book, Reverend Ateek contends that after the 1967 Six Day War the surge of religious Zionism - and a concurrent shift to the right in Israeli politics - made the Bible a more effective tool for justifying illegal settlement expansion.

Yet this was not only the case among Jewish Zionists, but also among Christian Zionists – whose odd alliance with the former belies the fundamental in their belief systems.

As the Jewish settler movement grew exponentially in Israel, Reverend Ateek explains in his book, so did the right-wing evangelical movement in North America, and their unwavering support for Israel, especially in the past decade as they began funding Jewish immigrants to Israel.

'An inclusive god'

Reverend Ateek contends that the post-1967 war trend in Israel to make Jerusalem exclusively Jewish is not historically accurate, writing that the ‘land promise’ found in the Bible (which states “I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:8) is actually a “theological anachronism,” and that the city has always been deeply multicultural.

Reverend Ateek commends the work of Rabbis for Human Rights who use their faith as a basis for defending Palestinian rights but says the way that religious settlers and Christian Zionists interpret the Bible “is unacceptable today”. They have to wake up to the fact that God is a god of justice, peace and truth. They have taken selective verses and interpreted them in a way that is exclusive. But my message is that God is an inclusive God who treats all people equally. Reverend Ateek states rather optimistically that “the movement of history is with international law – not military might or tribalism, but sadly notes that a racist and exclusionary theology persists. The “challenge of faith” he maintains, is to “reject exclusion and embrace inclusivity”.

Palestinian Gandhis: Jailed or assassinated

While he says that “most people in the world today who want a just peace for all the peoples of the land” are either in favour of a two-state or one-state solution, Israel wants neither.

“I hope that we will never accept an Israeli option that is not based on international law and UN resolutions,” he affirms.

In response to the tired old line often espoused in the West about waiting for a Palestinian “Gandhi” Reverend Ateek doesn’t miss a beat.

While he agrees that new Palestinian leadership is necessary, “Israel has killed many Palestinians who could have been Gandhis,” he relates. There are people today in Israeli prisons, like Marwan Barghouti, one of the main leaders of the second intifada – who was jailed in 2002 – who could have played a role in the peace process. Israel is looking for someone who will adopt their methods and if they don’t accept, they will be assassinated or sidelined.”

Christians in Palestine and brethren abroad

Yet as Palestine’s beleaguered Christian community continues to bleed into exile, reverend Ateek also criticises the church and its often non-Palestinian hierarchy for its inaction on social justice issues facing his people.

According to figures by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Christians comprise less than 1 percent of the population was Christian in 1948, but that number kept plummeting since the *Nakba*.

Most Palestinian Christians live in the West bank, namely Bethlehem, and follow the Greek Orthodox Church and other Eastern denominations.

His new book traces the fascinating history of Christians in Palestine. According to Reverend Ateek, when Michel Sabah was ordained the first Roman Catholic Palestinian Archbishop in 1987 – the first non-Italian in five centuries – and when Reverend Ateek was a canon of St George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem, there was a greater spirit of activism. But the often fragmented Christian community in Palestine, he says, who have “been there for 2,000 years under all kinds of governors and rulers and occupiers,” can be reunited through a national movement of non-violent resistance.

Reverend Ateek also hopes that once there is a “just peace”, Palestinian Christians in the diaspora will return and invest in the new state. He hopes that those in the diaspora will follow the example of Jewish Americans who have very successfully mobilised and lobbied for political influence.

As for Christian brethren in the West, Reverend Ateek says more of them need to speak up: “We need courageous people who are willing to stand up and look Zionists in the eye and say: ‘I am not anti-Semitic. What Israel is doing is wrong and unjust.’ That’s the kind of clear, non-violent confrontation we need.” From “Middle East Eye” <http://www.middleeasteye.net>

