

Congressional Briefing Calls on US Leaders to Challenge Israeli Settlement Expansion and Annexation of Palestinian Land

WASHINGTON, DC—On Tuesday, Feb. 23, a delegation from the Bethlehem district in the occupied West Bank told a packed room of congressional staffers what daily life is like under the Israeli occupation and argued that Israel's ongoing, illegal annexation of Palestinian land and settlement expansion are obstacles to any just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More than 45 staffers from the offices of 29 representatives and 9 senators attended the briefing at the Rayburn House Office Building, along with 25 representatives from Middle East peace and justice groups.

Speakers included Ahmad Sokar, mayor of Wadi Foquin; Shukri Radayda, director of the Bethlehem Governorate; Kifah Manasra, a professor at Jericho's Al-Estiklal University and a native of Wadi Foquin now living in Bethlehem; and Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, general secretary for the United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society. The United Methodist Church has worked with Wadi Foquin for seven years through the Friends of Wadi Foquin partnership, which was established to assist with community development and justice advocacy for this Palestinian Muslim village of 1,300 people. The interfaith briefing was moderated by Rev. Susan Wilder, coordinator of the Faith Forum on Middle East Policy, a network of Christian denominations and organizations working for a just peace in the Middle East.

After opening remarks by Friends of Wadi Foquin chair Rev. Michael Yoshii, Mayor Sokar painted a picture of daily life in this agricultural village—showing photos of farmers at work in their fields, women making apricot jam, children and youth engaged in school and volunteer activities, preparations for a wedding, and a soccer field under construction. Then he laid out the threats against it—showing maps of the planned path of Israel's separation wall through the west side of the village; and of Betar Illit, an illegal Jewish-only settlement expanding into the village on the east. Photos documented the growth of Betar Illit, now estimated to hold 60,000 residents; raw sewage flowing from the settlement onto farmers' fields, making them unusable for agriculture; government-issued land-annexation orders on village farmlands and stop-work orders on construction projects; a small playground overtaken by armed settlers; nonviolent protests

against annexation being met with tear gas; and the daily presence of occupation vehicles and soldiers.

Mr. Radayda, who oversees governance for all the communities in the Bethlehem district, presented a larger picture of Israeli land annexation and settlement construction throughout the West Bank, illustrating that what remains of the once-



Left to right: Mayor Ahmad Sokar, Mr. Shukri Radayda, and Professor Kifah Manasra

planned future Palestinian state is now a Swiss cheese map dotted with more than 200 Israeli-only settlements connected by Israeli-only highways. During a later question-and-answer session, he stated that the facts on the ground clearly indicate Israel is not interested in a two-state solution, but is headed in the direction of one apartheid state, which will eventually have to be met by challenges to its claim of being a democracy as well as a shift in governance to accommodate a pluralistic society.

Offering a rare glimpse into the lives of Palestinian women under occupation, Ms. Manasra, a criminal psychology professor, discussed how occupation forces shame and intimidate women at checkpoints so they will choose to remain at home, isolated and underemployed, rather than risk harassment by traveling to more fulfilling jobs offering greater independence outside their villages; and how the struggle for women's rights is often subjugated to the struggle for state's rights, resulting in women suffering from discrimination based on gender as well as ethnicity. She also talked about the psychological effects on children from the constant military presence and threat of arrests, and the pressure on mothers to keep their own suffering to themselves so they can be strong role models for their children.



Mayor Sokar presented Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe with tokens of gratitude for the United Methodist Church's efforts on behalf of Wadi Foquin, while Rev. Yoshii (far left) and Omar Faquih from the Palestinian Embassy look on.

Despite the grim reality they presented, all the Palestinian speakers expressed optimism for the campaign to save Wadi Foquin and confidence in the eventual end of the occupation and establishment of equal rights for all. Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe of the United Methodist Church closed the presentation by sharing her own observations about Wadi Foquin and the West Bank from a recent trip she made there, underscoring the other panelists' statements as well as the church's role in opposing the occupation and the settlements through witness, advocacy, and boycott.

Fahmi Manasra, one of the founders of the Wadi Foquin partnership and a participant in the Bethlehem delegation's speaking tour leading up to the briefing, served as translator and participated in the Q & A afterward. Hebron mayor Dr. Daoud Al Zatari, who happened to be in Washington, DC, for meetings that week, also spoke during the Q & A, echoing the panelists' desires for freedom and equal rights. Hebron is the largest city in the West Bank, with a population of 250,000 people in the city itself and 800,000 in the district.

The briefing was sponsored by Friends of Wadi Foquin, the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, Faith Forum on Middle East Policy, US Campaign to End the Occupation, and Churches for Middle East Peace.