



# MennoLetter from Jerusalem

Vol. II, No. 1, February 1, 2003

*A Middle East View by Mennonite Church Liaison,  
Glenn Edward Witmer*

~~~~~

*“Each of us must turn inwards and destroy in himself  
all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others.”*

*—Etty Hillesum,*

a young Dutch girl facing transportation to Auschwitz

*“Islam, as practiced by the vast majority of people, is a peaceful religion,  
a religion that respects others.”*

*—President George W. Bush*

~~~~~

*Likud 38, Labor 19, out of 120 Knesset seats.*

## *One Battle Over, the Main War Awaits*

The right-wing block in last Tuesday’s Israeli election emerged larger than initially predicted. The swing to the Right over the makeup of the outgoing Knesset, and the personal victory for Ariel Sharon, was not unexpected, especially when the opposition Labor party could not stop scuffling among themselves, leaving their freshly appointed leader Amram Mitzna, to fight an uphill and losing battle. Another few weeks will be needed to see what kind of coalition Sharon can stitch together but most pundits see any new government unraveling again within 18 months.

The outcome leaves in place a military colleague and soulmate for the US president—Sharon visited Washington seven times during his first term—just as Washington ponders its timing for a probable war with Iraq, with the almost certain involvement of Israel to counter anticipated belligerence from Saddam Hussein toward the Jewish nation, as happened during the 1991 Gulf War.

In Jerusalem’s largest shopping mall, dozens of Israelis lined up to get gas masks, with fears of war revived by the discovery of empty chemical warheads near Baghdad. Most of Israel’s 6.6 million people have received gas masks from the military over the years. During the 1991 conflict, the 39 Scud missiles Iraq fired at Israel turned out to be armed only with conventional explosives. This time around, Israeli officials say Iraq’s ability to launch Scuds has been hard hit by advance US and British bombing, and the Jewish state’s new Arrow-2 ballistic system promises to destroy incoming missiles.

*Attack response instruction booklet distributed to Israeli citizens:*

*“In Case of a Real Emergency”*

*—Your Handy Guide to Sirens, Gas Masks, and All-Clear Signals.*

A smiling family of four appears on the cover of a booklet Israel began distributing to its citizens on Thursday with instructions on how to prepare for Iraqi missile attacks if a new Gulf War erupts. “In Case of a Real Emergency” is a 51-page guide to sirens, gas masks, sealed rooms, and all-clear call signs, being mailed by the army to two million homes. Upon hearing an alert, the booklet says, civilians should go to bomb shelters or to the reinforced “safe rooms” that have been standard in Israeli housing since the 1991 Gulf War, seal them against the outside air and don gas masks. “Remember, keeping a cool head and following all the instructions will help all family members to cope better with staying in the safe room,” the booklet said.

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

### *No Such Thing As Half a Democracy!*

*“Fully half of the people living under Israeli rule have only limited rights of citizenship.”*

Gideon Levy, writing in *Ha'aretz*, took aim at the oft-repeated claim of Israel being the “only democracy in the Middle East.” He points out that fully *half* of the people living under Israeli rule have only limited rights of citizenship—e.g., the Arab citizens of Israel who, though having the right to vote and standing for office, are discriminated against in just about every realm of public life, sometimes even by law—others have no rights of citizenship at all, such as the people living under occupation, and the foreign workers who have been brought in by the hundreds of thousands in recent years to replace the Palestinians in the cheap labor market.

More than 10 million people live between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, in the Israeli state and in its occupied territories. The separation between the occupied areas and the state is anachronistic: Israel has existed for far more years with the occupation than without it, and the territories are an integral part of it, with all this entails. Some 3.5 million Palestinians have been living under a brutal, rigorous military occupation for well over three decades. Surely no one will try to claim that they are free. Another 300,000 to 400,000 foreign workers live without basic rights.

It is true, Levy says, that Israel has democratic structures that are much more developed than its Middle Eastern neighbors, thanks in no small measure to Western support for totalitarian regimes and the lingering effects of the colonial era. But access to those structures is limited for many and barred for many others. He points out the fundamental and inescapable truth that Israelis must confront: “It is impossible to be both occupiers *and* democrats; there is no such thing as enlightened exploiters and racists. Those are unresolvable contradictions, flagrant oxymorons—Israel’s claims about its democratic character are empty boasts. Just as there is no such thing as a partial pregnancy, there is no such thing as a partial democracy either.” Once the occupation is ended, Israel can begin to build a true democracy, with rights for all who live under the rule of its law and government.

—*Ha'aretz*

*A bold act of conscientious disobedience.*

### *Israeli Officer Obstructs Attack on Palestinians*

An Israeli intelligence officer who feared a planned air strike would kill innocent Palestinians foiled the attack by holding back information critical to the mission, the *Ma'ariv* newspaper reported. The officer’s act of disobedience was the latest in a series of actions taken by Israelis opposed to the tough tactics Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has employed against Palestinians. *Ma'ariv* said the officer, a lieutenant in an elite intelligence unit, delayed passing on information for an air raid planned against a Palestinian city after 22 people were killed on January 6 in a double suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

The unidentified officer told a military tribunal he acted out of conscience, saying innocent people would have been killed, and calling his orders illegal under international law. Asked about the report, the army spokesman’s office confirmed an intelligence officer was removed from his post after disobeying a direct order and impairing a military operation, but he declined to give details. The army has refused to sanction conscientious objection, saying Israel’s security would be harmed if soldiers were allowed to opt out of service while the country was locked in a violent struggle.

Also, in December, the Israeli Supreme Court said it could not back the idea of “selective conscientious objection” by eight reserve soldiers who had refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, occupied by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war. Sociologist Oz Almog of Haifa University said some Israelis, dismayed by the weakness of Israel’s peace camp, were striking out on their own against the establishment. “This kind of conscientious objection is important and it is good that we have it,” Almog said of the reservists who refused to serve on occupied land. —*Reuters*

... *Conscientious objector, Haggai Matar, is currently in prison*—for her fourth term—for refusing to enlist in the Israeli military or take part in any way in the continuing occupation and violent oppression of Palestinians. Along with her, the number of young men and women currently serving prison terms for refusing to enlist or who refuse to participate in military action in the Occupied Territories is unprecedented. This resistance movement was recently joined by the intelligence officer taking a stand of ‘Resistance Inside the Army’ when he refused to provide information for a bombing mission that he considered illegal and immoral. While part of Israeli society has again elected a hard-line, right-wing, militarized government, other Israelis refuse in growing numbers to execute the military action this entails. —*Jewish Peace News*

### *Rally in Gaza in Support of Iraq*

Thousands of Palestinians toting pictures of Saddam Hussein marched in support of the Iraqi leader last week as Israelis lined up for gas masks, fearing attack on their cities if there is a US-Iraq war. In Gaza City, about 3,500 Palestinians filled narrow streets with fluttering Iraqi flags and pictures of Saddam. Some chanted together, “Our beloved Saddam, strike Tel Aviv,” reviving an old slogan from the 1991 Gulf War. Flanked by three guards hefting submachine guns, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, a Hamas leader, told reporters that the march was evidence of strong Palestinian support for Iraq. “The Palestinian and Iraqi people are in the same trench of resistance against the aggression and against injustice,” he said. Palestinian police officers did not try to break up the rally. —*For Your Glory*

### *“The Flow of Blood Gladdens My Soul...”*

A Jewish organization cites evidence that the Palestinian Authority has been encouraging Palestinian children to seek death as ‘Martyrs.’ Examples include a drawing depicting a dead child Martyr in a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade PA schoolbook, alongside the following poem glorifying Martyrdom: “*I shall carry my soul in my palm / And toss it into the abyss of destruction... / By your life, I see my death, / but I hasten my steps towards it... / Hearing [weapons’] clash is pleasant to my ear / And the flow of blood gladdens my soul... / By your life! This is the death of Men / And who asks for a noble death, here it is...*”

This poem appears in three other schoolbooks, and has been recited by children on PA television. In addition, school books induce children not to fear dying by teaching that death is predetermined and that Martyrdom is better than any other death: “The Muslim sacrifices himself for his belief and wages Jihad [Holy War] for Allah. He is not swayed, for he knows that the date of his death has been predetermined and that his death as a Martyr on the field of battle is preferable to death in his bed.” —*Palestine Media Watch*

*Israel must stop settlement construction in the territories.*

### *Powell Wants “Real Palestinian State” by 2005*

The creation of a “democratic, viable” Palestinian state is possible in 2005 if the Palestinians “clamp down on terrorism,” US Secretary of State Colin Powell said recently. Speaking at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, he also called on Israel to stop settlement construction in the territories. “A Palestinian state, when it’s created, must be a real state, not a phony state that’s diced into a thousand different pieces,” he said. Israeli diplomatic sources had no official response to Powell’s comments, not wanting to get into a public disagreement with the US administration on the eve of a possible move against Iraq.

In recent weeks, the overriding assumption in senior diplomatic circles in Jerusalem has been that all public US comments on the Middle East must be “taken with a grain of salt” and seen within the context of a desire to appease the Arabs in advance of the Iraq campaign. Powell also called on the Palestinians to install a “responsible” leadership and representative government that will “clamp down on terrorism, that will say to its people, ‘Terrorism is not getting us anywhere. It is not producing what we want, a Palestinian state.’” —*For Your Glory*

*“Children are not allowed to go to school; those who do are breaking the law!”*

## *Education is Against the Law?*

Recently the Israeli army entered Hebron University and Hebron Polytechnic Institute, confiscated computers, and closed the universities for fourteen days, possibly extended for six months. The universities are located in the part of Hebron under Palestinian civil authority. Meanwhile the part of Hebron under Israeli military control entered its eleventh week of Israeli imposed curfew on the Palestinian residents.

Two weeks ago Israeli police detained my teammate Lorne Friesen and me for helping young children go to school as part of our work with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). When we argued that children under curfew were supposed to be allowed to go to school according to international law, the police who detained us pointed to the border police who had complained against us and stated: “*He* is the law. When he says children are not allowed to go to school, those who do are breaking the law. When you help children break the law, you are breaking the law and we must arrest you.” We told him that there had been an agreement with the District Coordinating Office that children under curfew should be allowed to go to school. I called the DCO and no one answered. We were allowed to leave but were threatened with arrest if we continued to help children go to school.

—Dianne Roe, *Christian Peacemaker Teams* <http://www.cpt.org>

*“We may have crossed the line this time...”*

## *Just a Game?—Just for Fun?*

The recent rise of anti-Semitism in France and elsewhere in Europe [attacks on synagogues, defaced Jewish cemeteries] continues to concern many Jews. It reminds them of how Germans in the thirties acted out similar feelings of hatred. So parents of some 100 Danish scouts were outraged over a game of tag at a scout camp in which their children acted as Jews, wearing yellow Stars of David, and tried to escape from adults pretending to be Nazis.

The local branch of the Danish Christian scout group organized the game last month near Copenhagen. The group of about 160 scouts, aged 11-14, included a dozen teenagers from the Danish-speaking minority in northern Germany. The schoolyard was turned into a mockup concentration camp with swastikas on the windows. Jes Imer of the local scout chapter said that they “may have crossed the line this time with a night game where Nazis chase Jews.” The schoolyard included a sign with the German words, “*Arbeit macht frei*” [“*Work will set you free*”], the infamous inscription over the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. “I don’t know whether I should apologize,” Imer said; “I didn’t want the game to hurt anyone...”.

## *Another Palestinian Village Faces Annihilation*

*The containment fence, separating Palestinians and Israelis, keeps growing.*

Israeli bulldozers will soon destroy another entire village, Al-Daba’, consisting of 250 Palestinians living in 42 houses. Sixty-ton American-made armored Caterpillar D-9 bulldozers will make short work of 42 houses, over 150 acres of agricultural land, a mosque, and an elementary school for 132 children. The military order required the clearing of 50 meters of land next to the billion-dollar wall (financed by the United States) being built to separate Palestinian land from Israel in the northern part of the West Bank. The clearing operation has exceeded its orders and now the destruction will extend 500 meters into the West Bank and engulf Al-Daba’.

Construction of the 8-meter high, 360-kilometer long wall has been proceeding inside the 1967 armistice line. When completed, an additional seven percent of Palestinian land will have been confiscated, and if the wall is extended to Hebron, ten percent of land will move to the Israeli side of the border. The wall will be fitted with motion sensors, observation towers every 300 meters, barbed wire, and a two-meter deep ditch to prevent Palestinians from entering Israel. The Israeli wall has

been compared to the Cold War's Berlin Wall, separating the East and West Berlin, and creates a concentration camp of the West Bank. The Al-Daba' land confiscation is just the latest outrage of land stealing. Thus far, since 1967, Israel has confiscated 750,000 acres of the 1.5 million acres of Palestinian land in the West Bank and Gaza. Ariel Sharon initiated land confiscation and settlement construction in 1967 as Israel's Minister of Housing. —*The Palestine Monitor*; www.palestinemonitor.org

### *“We do not believe in so-called ‘peace’ with Israel.”*

A Palestinian Christian leader who was sacked as his church's official spokesman continues to praise suicide bomb attacks and has lauded church members who are teaming with Muslims to form human shields to defend Iraq. At a reception in Haifa, Greek Orthodox priest Father 'Atallah Hanna called for joint Islamic-Christian operations to interfere with the imminent US attack on Iraq and liberate Palestine from “the [Mediterranean] sea to the [Jordan] river,” according to Al-Quds Press Hamas' news agency.

Hanna, also known as Archimandrite Theodosios Hanna, was removed from his position as spokesman of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem after his praise of suicide attacks, but he continues to present himself as an official voice. Hanna said that when he is freed from house arrest and his passports are returned, he will put together a 'Christian' delegation that will go to Iraq to serve as a human shield against the anticipated war. The priest recently offered his views on two other occasions—in a sermon marking the Epiphany at a Greek Orthodox cathedral in Jerusalem, he said, “We encourage our youth to participate in the resistance, to carry out martyrdom attacks, and to participate in removing the occupation. We do not believe in so-called ‘peace with Israel’ because peace cannot be made with Satan,” he charged. “Israel is the greatest Satan.”

#### *Palestinian Centre for Human Rights Report on Israeli Violations in Occupied Territories*

### *International Community Silent as Violations Continue*

*There is often concern that Palestinian attacks against Israelis—such as the recent suicide bombings in Tel Aviv—receive major international press attention, while the continuous violence by Israeli Occupying Forces against the Palestinians remains unreported.*

Israeli occupying forces have escalated their illegal military actions against Palestinian civilians and property. They invaded Palestinian areas and destroyed private and public property, while they have maintained full control over many areas in the West Bank for several weeks. The occupying forces have perpetrated more illegal actions and human rights violations against Palestinian civilians, including willful killings, shelling of and incursions into Palestinian areas, house demolitions, and agricultural land leveling. This past week, 25 Palestinians, mostly civilians, including three children and a woman, were killed by Israeli forces.

A week ago, Israeli forces killed 13 Palestinians, including two children, and destroyed nearly 20 civilian facilities in Gaza City when they invaded the al-Zaytoun neighborhood, reinforced with heavy military vehicles and combat helicopters. In addition, about 40 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were injured. The day before, heavy military vehicles moved into the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanoun. Israeli forces, covered by intense shelling and supported by helicopters, blocked the main road leading to the town. They also destroyed four bridges that linked the town with its surroundings to isolate it and restrict movement of Palestinian civilians. Combat helicopters opened fire at a number of Palestinian boys who were throwing stones at the Israeli forces. A civilian was killed and 14 other Palestinians were wounded, including nine children. Earlier on the same day, Israeli combat helicopters launched five missiles, three of which struck a blacksmith's workshop in a densely populated area in Gaza City. The workshop was totally destroyed and a number of adjacent houses were severely damaged. A fourth missile hit an Anglican church inside al-Ahli Hospital in

Gaza City. The missile penetrated the roof of the church and caused severe damage. The adjacent pediatric and gynecologic clinics of the hospital were also damaged.

This week, occupying forces demolished a number of Palestinian houses and razed a large area of agricultural land in the Gaza Strip. In Rafah, 25 houses were demolished and six others damaged. Military forces razed approximately 100 acres of Palestinian agricultural land in the northern Gaza Strip. In nine cases of apparent willful killing, Israeli forces and settlers killed ten Palestinians, including a child and a woman. They also shelled Palestinian residential areas, killing a child and young man in Rafah in two separate incidents, and wounding dozens of civilians.

—Palestinian Centre for Human Rights [http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/W\\_report/English/2003/30-01-2003.htm](http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/W_report/English/2003/30-01-2003.htm)

## ~MY VOICE... YOUR VOICE

### *Getting to Know You...*

*The editor's recent speaking tour proved to be a very useful exercise to exchange ideas with Mennonites about the Middle East.*

The opportunity to meet many of you during my time last month in Ontario and Pennsylvania was a special treat. In some 20 presentations, most with subsequent question-and-answer sessions—to colleges, congregations, and community groups—audience reactions to the political, cultural, and inter-religious states of being were frequently challenging and intense. “What’s it really like there now...are you afraid?” “We feel so helpless. Is there anything we could do that would make a difference?” “Is there any role at all for the church in that war-soaked region?”

Among themes drawing the most responses from audiences was the historical summary of the Church’s treatment of Jews from the time of their first-century ‘parting of the ways’ with Christians. The purpose of that talk was to provide a context for discussing ‘*How we got here [into this political mess] from there!*’ Is there something we learn from the historical record that can help us understand the persistent mistrust and hatred between two great peoples, between descendants of the brothers Jacob and Esau, sons of Isaac, grandsons of Abraham? “That’s what you people have to understand first,” a Muslim student told me after a high school discussion session, “to get some idea of how we feel now.” “I had no idea of how dreadful Christians have been to others in the past,” said a teacher, wagging her head. “No wonder Muslims and Jews think Christianity is so violent.”

It was an important exercise—to speak with you, to hear your views and concerns. Especially to hear so many positive comments about the role of this modest newsletter in helping to guide your thinking and study. I learned it is posted on bulletin boards in schools and university libraries, copied and distributed to congregants who don’t have e-mail, excerpted for discussions in Bible study groups, and even collected into a reference archive in a resource center for teachers and pastors. Well, thank you all! I’m delighted too to learn about so much interest in coming to Jerusalem for the *study programs and tours*, and for the *internship opportunities* we are organizing for you.

With this issue of *MennoLetter* we begin its second year—Volume II. As before, I will appreciate your comments, ideas, even an occasional noodle-on-the-wrist when you think I got it wrong on something you feel strongly about. Keep writing! It keeps us on our toes, and we like to know you are there, interested, and involved. Happy 2003 to all, with *shalom/salaam* from the Middle East. —GEW

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” —Psalm 122:6*

---

Please introduce this publication, with its e-mail address and web access, in your church bulletin or web page. To subscribe or unsubscribe, write to us at [newsletter@mennojersalem.org](mailto:newsletter@mennojersalem.org). Views expressed in *MennoLetter* are not necessarily those of the editor or of the sponsoring agencies: MMN, Elkhart, IN & Newton, KS, USA; MC Canada WITNESS, Winnipeg, MB. When reprinting articles, please request permission. For back issues of *MennoLetter*, click: <http://mennonitechurch.ca/news/jersalemletter/>. Contents © 2003 by the writers.