NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Jesuit priest corresponds with Hamas

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Jan. 14, 2009

Fr. Raymond Helmick is a copious correspondent. For the past three years, the Jesuit priest has written nearly 20 letters to Khalid Mishal, founder and political leader of the Palestinian movement Hamas, urging him to abandon militancy, unify with Fatah, Hamas? political rival, and organize the Palestinians in a disciplined campaign of nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation.

?Your military weapons are too puny to stand against Israeli weapons, but that mobilized power of a people denying, without violence, any cooperation with its occupiers is something Israel could not withstand,? wrote Helmick in a Feb 2006 letter sent weeks after Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections.

The missives to Mishal are the latest chapter in Helmick?s extraordinary engagement with the major power brokers in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, an engagement conducted primarily through letters and, on rare occasions, meetings. Over the past two and a half decades, the priest has written to Palestinian political leaders and state officials from a series of U.S. and Israeli administrations, including the late president Yasir Arafat, U.S. presidents Clinton and both Bushes, secretaries of state Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, and Israeli prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon.

The letters and reports, which fill three volumes, provide one of the texts for a course on the Middle East that Helmick, a theology professor, teaches at Boston College.

?Conflict resolution is a process of interpretation,? Helmick said. ?I?m always very anxious to analyze, interpret, and see what options people have and to talk to them about it. ? Once there is an alternative to violence, violence is no longer a legitimate course. Arafat understood that. The Israelis understand that. Hamas understands that. Of course, they have to believe that other options are real, and that can take a lot of exploration.?

The 77-year-old priest has a long history of unofficially monitoring and mediating conflicts. He worked with warring factions in Northern Ireland, Lebanon and Yugoslavia. In Washington, he helped establish the U.S. Institute of Peace and later served as senior associate for the Program in Preventive Diplomacy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Both assignments gained him access to American foreign policy makers. With the Rev. Jesse Jackson, he helped facilitate the release of three American prisoners held in Belgrade during the 1999 conflict in Kosovo.

But it is the Israeli/Palestinian conflict that has consumed much of Helmick?s attention. He became involved with the conflict through his Jewish friend Richard Hauser, a sociologist, and Hauser?s wife, Hephzibah Menuhin, concert pianist and sister of famed violinist Yehudi Menuhin. The priest and couple founded London?s Center for Human Rights and Responsibilities, which in 1973 hosted a Palestinian delegation sent by Arafat to make contact with European Jews.

Helmick later met with the Palestinian leader several times in 1986, two years before the U.S. government officially recognized the PLO, and for the next two decades continued corresponding with him, weighing in on the options for peace amid negotiations over the Oslo and Camp David Accords.

In his book *Negotiating Outside the Law: Why Camp David Failed*, Helmick argues that the 2000 peace talks suffered from a structural flaw -- the neglect of international law. ?Disparity of power most basically defines this conflict. Unless the conflict is approached according to law the only alternative is a procedure based on power relationships and therefore determined by political and military superiority. That makes any agreement formed, nothing other than a Diktat,? he said. ?The law would not protect the occupation, but it would protect Israeli rights as well as Palestinians,? he added.

Within a week of Hamas? electoral win in 2006, Helmick sent Rev. Jackson his assessment of the election and proposed meeting with Mishal, who lives in exile in Damascus, Syria. Jackson and Helmick had previously attempted to engage with Hamas while on a 2002 interfaith delegation to Israel and the Palestinian territories. The delegates were scheduled to go to Gaza for a session with Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, but aborted their trip after Hamas detonated a bomb at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in retaliation for an Israeli F-16 attack launched days earlier. In an impassioned letter to the Muslim cleric, Helmick lamented that the bomb, an ?act of vengeance for vengeance,? had made it impossible for them to meet.

?What do you want of the Israelis?? the Catholic priest asked. ?Do you want them to remain in this hateful quest for vengeance or do you want to elicit from them compassion and justice? We are all responsible for our enemies, for their souls, and must seek to bring them to righteousness and repentance. That will only happen if you act with a higher morality than theirs in emulation of the compassion and righteousness of God.?

Despite the F-16 attack and subsequent bombing, Palestinians were contemplating a unilateral cease-fire with Israel during the summer of 2002. Hamas? reluctance to sign a cease-fire document stemmed from their disagreement with the document?s reference to the Israeli/Palestinian border, Helmick said.

?I advocated to them that they just leave the border out of the document and declare their cease-fire on the basis of compassion of Islam. That is eventually what they did, and, in fact, over the next four years, Hamas showed itself responsible in its restraint,? the priest said. In 2004, the Israelis assassinated Yassin.

Jackson and Helmick finally did meet Mishal in 2006. Israel?s war on Hezbollah had just concluded and the Lebanon crisis overshadowed much of the trip. Helmick reported that the Americans were warmly received in Damascus. The session with the Hamas leader and four members of his political bureau went until 3 a.m. ?[Mishal] assured us that his party?s intentions in no way intended the destruction of Israel. They set as their goal the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders,? wrote the priest in his summary of the session.

But according to Helmick, when urged to explicitly recognize the legitimacy of Israel, one of several Israeli preconditions for negotiating with Hamas, Mishal said the time for that had not come. Helmick attributes Hamas? refusal to several factors including concern for a disparity in the Oslo Accords and uncertainty over Israel?s borders. At Oslo, the PLO recognized the legitimacy of the Israeli state while Israel recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. ?The recognition was not symmetrical,? Helmick said. ?The

Israelis did not recognize the entitlement of the Palestinian people to a viable state.?

Amid the numerous proposals explored in Helmick?s correspondence, common themes emerge. To the Palestinians, he consistently argues for disciplined nonviolent resistance to the occupation as the only viable option. To the Americans and Israelis, he pleads for adhering to the rule of law.

Responses to the letters have varied. There have been perfunctory acknowledgements and a few specific replies. A 2002 epistle to Ariel Sharon, in which the priest pointedly asked if the prime minister was pursuing a policy of ?transfer? toward the Palestinians, elicited a pleasant note from Sharon?s secretary, Marit Danon, who thanked the American cleric for his ?in-depth analysis.?

More often than not, the dialogue has been one-way. The silence does not bother Helmick, who said he knows political leaders cannot articulate policy in letters to private individuals. For Mishal, who has survived one assassination attempt by the Israelis, merely acknowledging correspondence could be hazardous.

Helmick believes the need to engage with Hamas is more necessary than ever. ?Israel?s recent incursion into Gaza is just one more effort to knock Hamas out of the picture and get it done before Bush leaves office. But Hamas is gaining in political strength. Their popularity is growing in Gaza and the West Bank.?

So the priest continues to write. In the past two months, he has sent a dozen communiqués to all the major players, including letters to president-elect Barack Obama and Mishal.

(*Claire Schaeffer-Duffy lives in Worcester, Mass. and writes frequently for* NCR.)

Source URL (retrieved on *08/27/2016 - 00:00*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/jesuit-priest-corresponds-hamas