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A reply to Michael Sean Winters' remarks on divestment

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

NCR Today

The domestic demands here at the Catholic Worker in Worcester, Mass., have been high this month. Lots of making of beds for the guests in need who come and go. Lots of cooking. So I am late in discovering my colleague Michael Sean Winters' remarks on my previous post concerning Methodist initiatives to divest from companies involved in the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories.

Mr. Winters challenges the description of East Jerusalem, Gaza and "most of the West Bank" as Israeli-occupied, argues that Jerusalem is "united" and must stay so if peace is to be realized in the Holy Land, and contests comparing the Palestinian predicament to South African apartheid. Here's my reply.

The Methodists' listing of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem as Israeli-occupied that Mr. Winters cites is from a church report written in 2004, one year before Israel dismantled its Jewish-only settlements and formally withdrew from its occupation of the Gaza Strip. My blog post may not have made this point clear.

While it is true Israel is no longer the acting authority within Gaza, its control over the territory remains unambiguous. Since its 2005 withdrawal, Israel has denied or limited the entry of goods into Gaza, including humanitarian aid and construction material needed to rebuild after Israeli bombing during Operation Cast Lead; severely reduced Palestinian access to fishing waters from the 20 nautical miles, allotted under the Oslo Peace Accords; imposed buffer zones that gobbled up 14 percent of Gaza's territory (48 percent of the arable land); refused visas to Gazans wanting to study at U.S. colleges; and waged two assaults that killed more than 1,200 Palestinians.

Israel has justified these actions as necessary retaliation for Palestinian rocket-fire on its own communities. But its closure of Gaza, imposed after the 2006 election of Hamas and softened in 2010, has persisted even in times of quiet, suggesting control, as well as deterrence, is the modus operandi.

In effect, the blockade of Gaza, imposed by Egypt as well as Israel, has meant the collective punishment of the territory's 1.5 million inhabitants, which is illegal under international law, and the ongoing de-development of a once productive region. The Israeli human rights organization B'tselem reports that as a result of Israel narrowing Gaza's fishing corridor, the number of fishermen in Gaza between 2000 and 2010 dropped from 10,000 to 4,000 while the price of fish soared. And this in a region that has 32 percent unemployment. A 2012 study by Save the Children and Medical Aid for Palestinians found that restriction of food into the territory stunted growth for 10 percent of Gazan children under the age of 5 and contributed to high rates of anemia in school children (58.6 percent) and pregnant women (36.8 percent).

As for the West Bank, I am baffled at Mr. Winters' suggestion that most of the territory is not under Israeli occupation. Israel controls all borders, all points of entry and exit into the West Bank, much of the water supply, the segregated road system, the 200,000 Jewish-only settlements scattered throughout, and the Jordan Valley corridor. Additionally, Israel maintains full control in regions designated Area C and partial control in Area B. The Palestinian Authority only has full autonomy within Area A, the major cities in the West Bank, which effectively relegates their governance to a collection of bantustans.

If in referring to a "united Jerusalem," Mr. Winters means a city in which the rights of all its inhabitants are equally respected, then I am all for it. But Jerusalem is not "united." To even spend a few days in the city, as I have done on two separate occasions, is to observe a place of great disparity. One community is free to expand while the other struggles to hold onto its homes under a municipal system that seeks to expel the residents.

Unlike their Jewish neighbors, Jerusalem's Palestinian inhabitants, most of whom live in East Jerusalem, must constantly prove their residency. They are frequently subjected to capricious requests for documents -- children's birth certificates, school report cards -- to verify they do indeed live in the city. Even then, the much-coveted Jerusalem ID card can be denied or revoked. In the city's Palestinian neighborhoods, homes are demolished (as many as 350 razed in one year) on the flimsy pretense they lack a building permit, impossible to obtain. Or they are appropriated by zealous settlers consumed with a "biblical" urban plan.

There is little recourse against this grabbing of homes. The requirement for the elusive building permit is considered "legal." Courts drag their feet in determining the validity of a Palestinian deed. Rendered homeless, the city's internally dispossessed typically cram into the crowded apartments of relatives who inhabit crowded neighborhoods where municipal services are scant. The denial of these services is yet another detail in the tedious campaign to squeeze out the Palestinians from a "united" Jerusalem.

To witness the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in Jerusalem, as I have, is to see conflict in one of its most mundane and intimate forms. Wailing grandmothers. A family's belongings pathetically heaped on the sidewalk. Old men, camping across the street from the house that was once theirs, doggedly declaring, "I will not leave."

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None of these indignities are endured in the city's Jewish neighborhoods or among Jews newly arrived from distant lands who wish to reside in Jerusalem.

Mr. Winters wags his finger at the Methodists for likening the Palestinian predicament to apartheid, perhaps forgetting the comparison has been made by a veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle and Nobel Laureate, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He described the Israeli/Palestinian arrangement as "worse" than what he experienced in his homeland.

To challenge this arrangement, as the Methodists are doing, is not to indulge in "anti-Israeli bigotry" but to work for a just relationship between two peoples, both of whom are bound to live in the Holy Land. During my travels, I had the privilege of meeting some of the many courageous Israeli organizations and individuals leading the way in this effort. (See list below.)

Mr. Winters is probably correct in assuming Gaza, under the Hamas regime, is not a hospitable place for gays. During my own travels through the West Bank with a delegation of Jews, several of whom were lesbians, our group always received open-armed hospitality, even in conservative Palestinian villages. Nonetheless, I agree with the larger point of his critique.

Yet after acknowledging the abuses of Hamas, the Methodists are still left with the question of how they, as ordinary U.S. church people, can leverage peace in the region. Their divestment initiative does not target a specific community but corporations for making products that facilitate a conflict. It is a brilliant and practical tactic. So often, when the fight is on, we reach for the gun or preach a political peace process, which in this case has yielded nothing. We ignore the economics of battle -- the machinery and money that makes the whole bloody mess possible. Why not tackle these influences?

Such an approach is nonpartisan. If the Methodists discovered they had investments in companies manufacturing parts for rockets lobbed at Israelis or instruments of torture used by Hamas, I feel confident they would divest. In the meantime, why should they -- or any people of faith, for that matter -- fund militarized bulldozers used to raze homes or surveillance systems that monitor people as they are herded through checkpoints or fuses for bombs that level schools and hospitals as well as the homes of militants?

Some Israeli organizations working for a just resolution in Israel/Palestine:

B'tselem, an Israeli human rights organization

Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. I especially recommend the research of Meir Margalit, Israeli historian who served for 20 years as member of the Jerusalem City Council.

Ir Amim, "City of Nations" or "City of Peoples," an Israeli nongovernmental organization working for a Jerusalem that "ensures the dignity of all its residents and that safeguards their holy places"

Who Profits, an Israeli research project dedicated to "exposing" companies involved in the "occupation industry"

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