



# Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research and Training

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## **Palestinians as People, Not Terrorists: The Path to Dialogue and Peacebuilding**

A commentary by Dr. Mark Umbreit  
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The horror of periodic killing of Israeli soldiers and citizens by young Palestinian suicide bombers, as well as other terrorist acts, has led most Americans to have a very distorted perception of Palestinian people. The images portrayed in the media that highlight the devastating impact of these violent acts by a relatively small number of Palestinian extremists fuel the perception that all Palestinians embrace violence and hate all Jews. Rather than understanding these acts as rooted in tremendous desperation and hopelessness by a small impoverished non-nation that has lived under the longest occupation in modern history and in violation of international law, Americans are quick to condemn the forty-six year struggle of the Palestinian people to achieve self-determination, justice, and freedom.

Nothing can justify terrorist actions against civilian populations, whether committed by oppressed people or far stronger national governments. The Palestinian people I met both in Israel and the occupied territories during a recent trip to the mid-east represent the farthest thing from the mentality of terrorists one can imagine. These individuals, and many others in their communities, are deeply committed to peacebuilding through dialogue, collaboration, and co-existence. They are part of the vast majority of Palestinians, as indicated in recent polls, that favor the U.N. mandated two state solution in which Palestinians and Israelis share the land and live in co-existence with each other. Traveling into the occupied territories with an Israeli-Palestinian friend provided an entirely new lens through which to understand the history and struggle of the Palestinian people. This lens offered a very different, but equally impassioned and sincere, narrative as the one my peace loving Israeli friends and colleagues offered to me in the previous days. As we drove past numerous small Palestinian villages, one could feel the despair and devastation of the region.

In the Palestinian village of Bethlehem on the West Bank we visited the Director of the Palestinian Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation in. The Center works within the Palestinian community to teach conflict resolution and negotiation skills to children and adults, as well as police officers. It also engages in cross-border

collaborative projects with Israelis. We learned of his desire to enter into a collaborative arrangement with the Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota, to further his efforts to broaden the impact of mediation and conflict resolution among Palestinians.

During my trip, I was able to spend an evening at the home of my friend who is a Palestinian elder and leader, as well as a Christian and a citizen of Israel. He spoke with passion and love for his people and the Israeli people, but not the policies of the Israeli government. The gracious hospitality and warmth provided by his large family was truly a gift. Spending the evening sleeping in a totally Palestinian village in Israel was quite an experience. Meeting Palestinian adults and kids as the beautiful and gracious people they are taught me much about their culture. The following morning at my Palestinian friend's home and with his extended family we had a very engaged dialogue with five Israeli friends who joined us at different points. The yearning for peace by all present was clearly communicated and the love and respect for all people in the region was embraced. Yet, the differing narratives and perceptions of historical events continued to often clash. It is as though a different set of glasses offers each side a different view of what has happened over time. Still, this engaged dialogue ended in a strong spirit of tolerance and love for each other, as well as glimmers of hope that someday the political leadership of their communities will find a lasting pathway to co-existence, tolerance, and even compassion for all those who have endured the enormous suffering on both sides.

The numerous Palestinian people who I met are people like us. People who care about their families, love their children, care for each other, experience many of the same routine daily activities we do, are exceptionally gracious hosts to guests, and yearn for a better future, without violence and endless suffering. The pathway to dialogue and peacebuilding must be grounded in the reality of Israelis and Palestinians experiencing each other as the beautiful people they are, not as individuals or governments that commit terrorist acts that violate human rights and international law.

This article was written by Dr. Mark Umbreit. The University has not reviewed the content; the views and opinions expressed here do not reflect the official policies of the University, and the University of Minnesota is not responsible for the article's content.