Kris Hanna MP

STUDY TOUR REPORT:

EGYPT

2 to 9 January 2007
I was in Egypt from 2 January to 9 January 2007. I was specifically interested in the historical, religious and economic factors of the region. In order to understand the context of the places I visited in Egypt it may be useful to explain a bit about the background of the country.

**Background**

The richness of the Nile River and the protection offered by the surrounding deserts has facilitated the development of Egypt over the last few millennia. The area was ruled by a series of dynasties since 3200 BC, until the last native dynasty fell to the Persians in 341 BC. Since this time, the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines ruled at various stages, until the Arabs conquered the area in 642 AD. The Arabs introduced Islam and the Arabic language to Egypt, and ruled until the Mamluks seized power in 1250. Mamluks were slave soldiers who converted to Islam and had become a dominant military class themselves.

In 1517 the Ottoman Turks conquered the region; allowing the Mamluks to continue to govern. Completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 led Egypt to become a significant centre for global trade. However, it fell into great debt and by 1882 Britain had taken control of the government. Egypt attained full independence from Britain following World War II and is now a sovereign Arab State.

**Geography**

Egypt is 997,740 square kilometres in land area, and is divided in half by the Nile River. It sits on the Mediterranean Sea, bordered by Libya and the Gaza Strip, and the Red Sea to the north of Sudan. Egypt’s climate is very dry with several desert regions, including the Libyan, Nubian and Eastern deserts. The deserts have historically offered protection from invasion by nearby civilisations. With extended drought periods, Egyptians rely heavily on the annual summer floods of the Nile for water. The areas either side of the Nile are very fertile and provide ideal agricultural land. The Egyptian Government has also been ‘greening’ the deserts by adopting Israeli agricultural technology.

**Demographics**

Based on the 2006 census, Egypt’s total population was estimated at slightly fewer than 74 million people. Cairo, Egypt’s capital has a population of 20 million people and is the most populous city in Africa. Its population density is 2,136 people per square kilometre, compared with 64 per square kilometre in Egypt as a whole. Given Egypt’s relatively high population growth rate of around 1.75 per cent (the largest in the Arab world) and the population concentration in certain areas, Cairo is facing pressures on housing, employment and infrastructure. Interestingly, the proportion of children under the age of 18 in Egypt has significantly increased over the last two decades and now represents nearly half of the total population.

**Religion**

Egypt is officially a secular nation. The famed gods of ancient Egyptian mythology are rarely worshipped today; Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other minority religions have coexisted in Egypt since ancient times. With its 90% Muslim population, Islam is the state religion of Egypt today. The Egyptian Muslim population is predominantly Sunni, with a small number of Sufis and Shiites. Most of the remaining 10% are Christian; predominantly
Coptic Orthodox but with a small number of Greek Orthodox. There are other Christian minorities, a small immigrant Baha’i population and a very small community of Jews.

On 16 December 2006, Egypt’s Supreme Administrative Council ruled in favour of a clear distinction between “recognised religions” – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – and all other religions. Effectively, this upholds the ban on the practice of any non-recognised religion, including Baha’ism, Atheism and Agnosticism. Although there are only a very small proportion of Egyptian citizens who do not practise a recognised religion, they are restricted from practising or openly advocate their beliefs. For example, in 2000 an Egyptian atheist, who wanted to establish an atheist association, was charged with insulting Islam and its prophet in his writing.

If Egypt is becoming less diverse and less tolerant in terms of religion, there are serious international security implications. As part of this study tour, I was interested in assessing the remaining influence of minority religions for this reason. Another reason for exploring the minority religions in Egypt is my acquaintance and friendship with Coptic and Greek Orthodox Christians in Adelaide, who originated from Egypt.

Judaism

In ancient and biblical times, Semites are believed to have settled around the Nile Delta. Many more Jews immigrated into the area during Ptolemaic and Roman times, particularly in the area surrounding Alexandria. By 1948, there were between 75,000 and 150,000 Jews in Egypt; however, Judaism has never been a dominant religion in Egypt, and today there are only around 100 to 1,000 Jews remaining in the country. The majority fled to Israel, Brazil, France and the US.

Ironically, the Jewish populations in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries were subjected to persecution, land confiscation and violence when European Zionists succeeded in establishing the State of Israel through terrorism and warfare in 1948. Thus, one of the ironies of the Zionist’s success in Palestine (which was based on a stated objective of providing a safe-haven for persecuted Jews) exacerbated persecution of Jews in several countries.

Christianity

Christianity was Egypt’s dominant religion from around 49 BC until the end of the 12th century. The Coptic Orthodox Church (Copts being the decedents of the ancient Egyptians), which split from the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in 451 AD remains the main Christian church of Egypt to this day. There are also a small number of Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Armenian churches in Egypt.

The Arab-Muslim conquest of Egypt in 639 AD marked the commencement of a continuing conversion to Islam. Although at the time of the conquest many remained loyal to the Coptic Orthodoxy, by the 13th century Egypt had become predominantly Muslim. The introduction of the Arabic language, the Crusades and special taxes on Coptic Christians increased conversion to Islam. However, conditions for Christians were improved in the 1800’s under Muhammad Ali’s reign.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria is believed to have been established by St Mark. Since the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, it has been a significant Church of Egypt with many Egyptians accepting Christianity. Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt have been relatively peaceful in recent years. However, Copts claim to face discrimination in the
workplace and restrictions on religious developments including church constructions. They also claim that recent electoral regulations benefit Islamist parties to the detriment of Coptic representation. Throughout Egypt, as with the rest of the Middle East, Christianity has been steadily declining. This has been attributed to emigration, low birth-rates, and in some areas, persecution.

Alexandria

Wednesday 3 January – Alexandria

I arrived by airplane, flying from Australia without a stopover on 2 January and settled in to accommodation in Alexandria.

The City of Alexandria was name after its founder, Alexander the Great. It was established around 334 BC and was once the capital of Egypt. With the leading port in Egypt, it is now a key transportation and commercial centre and has thriving petroleum, asphalt and textile industries. In Alexandria I visited several sites of religious and historical significance.

I was shown around St Catherine’s church. It was built in 1805 by Napoleon’s troops, and is the largest Roman Catholic Church, seating up to 1,000 people.

I also met with a priest when I went to the Greek Orthodox Church. This church is 150 years old and is located next to the Greek Orthodox headquarters, housing the Patriarch in Alexandria.

I turned up at the Greco-Roman Museum, but it is partially closed for the next two years for renovations. Instead I visited the Alexandria Museum, which offers a history of the city from Greek occupation, Muslim and Ottoman Empires, English and French colonialism to modern times.

During the day, I relaxed at the Square of the Martyrs. It is a huge park dedicated to the fallen in the 1973 war against Israel.

I also visited the local Parliament for the Alexandria region. The region of six-to-seven million people is made up of 14 electorates with 10 representatives each for electorate. From the 140 elected members, a president and two vice presidents are elected. I met with one of the Vice Presidents. There are 40 ministers, but most funding for public services and infrastructure comes from the national treasury. Perhaps such financial arrangements are the future of the Australian States.

Similar to Australia, Alexandria has multiparty elections and numerous independents have been elected into Parliament. Although like here, it is difficult for Independents to be elected.
Thursday 4 January

I visited the Roman Amphitheatre, a huge site that has been excavated recently.

I also visited the Memorial to the Unknown Soldier and its cemetery which lie adjacent to the harbour at Alexandria. Like similar monuments in other countries, it is dedicated to those soldiers who have died in wars whose human remains are unidentified.

The Alexandria Library proved to be architecturally impressive, but was extremely disappointing for its English book collection. Although there have been international contributions for the design and building of the Library, and it appears to have ample staff and technology, it doesn’t have enough books. The collection is larger than the Adelaide Reference Library, but the Barr Smith Library’s collection is much more extensive, at least in the areas of comparative religion, politics and history.

I was particularly keen to explore the collection of the Alexandria Library because of the extraordinary reputation of the original Alexandria Library, burnt down long ago. It is thought to have been founded at the beginning of the 3rd century BC, and was once the largest library in the world. It is believed to have once contained the entirety of knowledge about the ancient world, but has been destroyed by fire several times throughout history. Archaeologists have discovered at least 13 lecture halls at the site, suggesting that it was a great centre for learning with the capacity to house up to 5,000 students.

I was in Egypt when Saddam Hussein was executed. While the western media reported few disturbances with the execution, the Egyptian media give a different picture. Many people found the execution offensive, particularly coming at a time of Muslim holy celebration. The Egyptian media reported that there were uprisings in Iraq, particularly in Saddam’s home town of Tikrit. It is a very disappointing indicator as to the degree of bias is in the Australian reporting of Iraq, and how Western powers want to play it down. This kind of reporting, analysis and commentary was to be found throughout the duration of my stay.

Saturday 6 January

I was forced to take up petrol sniffing whilst travelling in taxis in Alexandria. You would think the petrol would be in the petrol tanks, but the smell seems to be in the floorboards, many of which are transparent! Or perhaps the smell comes from the petrol cap, which in some cases consists of an old rag shoved into the tank hole.

On this day I travelled by taxi from Alexandria to Cairo, visiting monasteries along the way. Travellers must pay a small sum when departing regions. I needed to pay when using a taxi to leave Alexandria. The same applies when leaving Cairo. This would not apply in Australia because of Section 92 of the Australian Constitution.

During the 3rd century, many Christian Egyptians travelled to the desert to pray, work and dedicate their lives to seclusion and the worship of God. This began the tradition of monasticism.

There were hundreds of monasteries and thousands of caves and cells throughout the Egyptian desert by the end of the fourth century. Many of them still operate today. En route to Cairo, I visited the monasteries at Wadi El-Natroun, where the Coptic Pope sits. It was eerie to walk into the monastery chambers where hermits slept some 1,700 years ago.
Sunday 7 January

Many of the shops were closed on the day I arrived in Cairo, as it was the Coptic Christmas according to the Gregorian calendar. It was interesting that it is declared a national holiday; that many shops close here to recognise a non-mainstream religion’s holy day, especially in the context of recent debates in SA about our retail trading hours.

The City of Cairo – Egypt’s capital – was founded in 648 AD and is the chief industrial and commercial centre in Egypt.

Getting around Cairo is hard work indeed. Whether travelling on foot, by public transport or by taxi, the crowds are a constant pressure. The other impediment to easy living in Cairo is the very serious pollution problem. After returning across town by taxi from one of my appointments, I wiped my forehead with the sleeve of my white business shirt and it received a black smear of sooty perspiration. The other aspect of downtown Cairo, which is striking to newcomers, is the persistence of the beggars. Several times I had my arm literally grabbed while walking in the street, accompanied by a ferocious and insistent plea for money. The only alternatives were either acquiescence or equally ferocious and insistent refusals. Interestingly, I found Cairo to be comparable in many ways to the larger Indian cities which I visited many years ago.

The unemployment rate is just over 10% throughout Egypt. It is particularly higher for young adults in Cairo; with 30% of 15 to 30 year-olds unemployed. The literacy rate is a low 57.7%. While the lower classes struggle with homelessness, malnourishment and poverty, the middle class struggles with dim employment prospects; even those with tertiary education. Also, the housing shortage and increasing demands from families of the bride for an extravagant dowry are placing further pressures on young adult men. No wonder that many are turning to religion and prayer. The feeling of helplessness makes many vulnerable to radical speakers who preach anti-West sentiment and the idea that Islam is being "persecuted". Thus Islamic faith in the region is becoming radicalised.

Some Egyptian business opportunities I identified for South Australia include: Pigeon Farms – on the road from Alexandria to Cairo there are dozens of pigeon farms involving large conical structures in which birds are bred for sale to restaurants. This could have some potential in SA, although diners would need to be convinced of the merits of eating pigeon meat. Also, there is an abundance of fresh strawberry juice sold in Egypt. It is very popular in Egypt, and I could imagine drinking strawberry juice at a juice bar in Adelaide.

Smoking is rife in Cairo. Throughout cafes, restaurants, taxis and public buildings smoking is allowed. I realised that there weren’t many restrictions when a waiter served drinks with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. There are gun stalls everywhere, and although there are restrictions on sales, it appears that guns on the black market are freely available. To obtain a handgun and ammunition, one only needs to go to market stalls and haggle over the price. The road rules are vastly different to Australia; drivers in Cairo have complete disregard for the white lines in the middle of the road. At around 30 cents per litre, petrol in Egypt is less than a quarter of Australian prices.
Monday, Tuesday 8 to 9 January

Over these two days I had a number of appointments and visits to make.

I visited the American University with a thriving English-speaking population, although I was not allowed to take photos. I also visited the Al-Azhar Mosque, which is the headquarters for the Sunni Muslims, and the Khan al-Khalili Bazaar – the city’s main market.

Economic Aspects

When visiting DFAT/Austrade officials at the Australian Embassy, I was warned about the dangers of going to the West Bank. I also discussed business opportunities for Australian companies in Egypt including:

- Mining: this industry is booming in Egypt. There is scope for SA mining service companies such as those that supply drilling equipment, geo-spatial equipment and computer technology. Local companies like Boart Longyear would definitely have scope to export their services to Egypt. SA was mapped recently for mineral deposits. These skills could be applied to Egypt.
- Education: with a population of 70 million and such a high proportion of young people, there are opportunities for SA universities to take advantage. There is only limited, developing middle class in Egypt. Almost the entire population is polarised between the very rich and the very poor. However, even if one considered just the top one percent of families in terms of wealth, there is still a potential market of millions from which to attract university students.
- Health: Australian government and aid organisations could make a commitment to health promotion in Egypt. This means opportunities for exporting manufactured diagnostic and surgical equipment, particularly bearing in mind that there are over thirty million people under 18 years of age.
- Wine: there could be a market for selling SA wine to 5-star hotels in Egypt. It is difficult, however, to see SA wine breaking into the domestic market due to the 300-400 per cent import tax, and the lingering value placed on French wine.

Some of my other discussions in Cairo focussed on the Middle East conflict, including Israeli and US training and preparation for an air-strike against Iran.

Arab League

Unfortunately my appointment at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo was cancelled because the secretary-general Amr Moussa had to fly out to deal with heightened tension arising from Lebanese political issues. The Arab League was formed in 1945 by seven states to “serve the common good of all Arab countries, ensure better conditions for all Arab countries, guarantee the future of Arab countries and fulfil the hopes and expectations of Arab countries”. The League’s official charter states “The League should coordinate economic affairs including commercial relations, communications, cultural affairs, nationality, passports and visas, social affairs and health affairs”.

Early on Wednesday 10 January I flew out of Egypt.
Kris Hanna MP

STUDY TOUR REPORT:
PALESTINE/ISRAEL

11 to 24 January 2007
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 3
   1.1 INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE ................................................................................ 3
   1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ............................................................................... 3
   1.3 GEOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................... 5
   1.4 DEMOGRAPHICS ..................................................................................................... 5
   1.5 RELIGION .............................................................................................................. 6

2. OCCUPIED TERRITORIES ...................................................................................... 8
   2.1 POLITICS ............................................................................................................... 8
   2.2 ECONOMY .......................................................................................................... 10
   2.3 EDUCATION ......................................................................................................... 10
   2.4 HEALTH .............................................................................................................. 12
   2.5 CIVIL SOCIETY AND NGOS ............................................................................ 12
   2.6 HOUSING ........................................................................................................... 14
   2.7 INFRASTRUCTURE ............................................................................................ 14
   2.8 HUMAN RIGHTS ................................................................................................. 15
   2.9 REFUGEES/RIGHT OF RETURN ....................................................................... 17
   2.10 SETTLEMENTS .................................................................................................. 18
   2.11 CHECKPOINTS AND THE SEPARATION WALL ............................................. 22

3. ISRAEL ....................................................................................................................... 25
   3.1 POLITICS ............................................................................................................ 25
   3.2 ECONOMY .......................................................................................................... 27
   3.3 EDUCATION ....................................................................................................... 27
   3.4 SOCIETY AND CULTURE ................................................................................... 28
   3.5 HOUSING ........................................................................................................... 29
   3.6 INFRASTRUCTURE ............................................................................................. 30
   3.7 MILITARY ........................................................................................................... 30
   3.8 HUMAN RIGHTS ................................................................................................. 30

4. CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................... 34
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

I travelled to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories for a Parliamentary study tour. I travelled by land from Jordan on January 10, 2007. I was held up at the Jordan/Israeli border on the Jordan River and interrogated intermittently over a four-hour period – not exactly a warm welcome to Israel. I toured Palestine/Israel for two weeks, departing on Wed 24th travelling by land back from Amman to fly back to Australia. It was an intense two weeks. Generally I was leaving the hotel between 8-9 am, and returning 5-6 pm with a full day of visits and interviews. I have bolstered this Parliamentary report and my eyewitness observations with relevant research to provide a context for my observations. I travelled widely throughout Israel and the West Bank, the West Bank refers to that part of Palestine between the 1967 Green Line and the Jordan River. The Green Line defines the separation between the two sides at the conclusion of the 1967 war.

Having met with a variety of Israeli and Palestinian organisations and individuals, it becomes apparent that Israel is doing as much as it can to isolate Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and to limit the political, economic, demographic and cultural development of Palestinians living within Israel. Hence, there are two distinct yet interrelated topics covered by this report: the plight of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories; and the difficulties faced by those living within Israeli borders.

Clearly, the current situation has evolved from a complex and contentious history. Accordingly, this report commences with a consideration of the historical, geographical, demographic and religious background to the region as a whole. This will provide the context for what follows; discussion, observations and analysis of the situation in the Occupied Territories, and in the State of Israel.

This report is intended as an unbiased discussion of the region and its issues as a whole. However, the framework for the report is human rights, which, given the vast and largely irrefutable inequalities between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians, requires significantly more consideration of Palestinians and their situation.

1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Apart from being the ancestral homelands of the Palestinian Arab people, the lands of modern Israel and the Occupied Territories have indisputable historical significance for Jews. Jerusalem was the location of the most important Jewish shrines; the first and second Temples on the Mount. The first, purportedly built during the reign of King Solomon, was destroyed by the forces of the Babylonian emperor Nebudchanezzar in the 6th century B.C. The second was built some 70 years later, and was destroyed by the Romans late in the first century A.D. According to some Jews, the return of the Messiah will herald the construction of a third temple. The Temple Mount is today the site of the Al-Aqsa mosque; the third holiest site in all Islam.

Thus the visit by former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2000 to the Temple Mount site was seen by Jewish conservatives as a political signal acknowledging their agenda. At the same time, to many Palestinian Muslims it was sufficiently insulting to provoke a Second Intifada (Arabic for “uprising”).

In modern history, Jewish migration to Palestine was established in 1837 by a wealthy British Jew. In 1855, the Jewish population in Palestine obtained a guarantee of protection and privileges from the Ottoman State, and were able to buy land, construct a hospital and set up
the first neighbourhood. By the 1880s, there were around ten thousand Jewish settlers in Palestine, who were mostly settled in Jerusalem. The Ottoman State attempted to limit the number of Jews immigrating to the region, but this was opposed by Britain and France. A further 25 thousand Jews came to Palestine over the next ten years. Most of these were from low-income families from Russia and Romania and were supported by the Zionist movement. British authorities also had a hand in assisting Jewish immigration into the area.

Jewish immigration continued to grow to an estimated 85 thousand by the early 1900s, at which point the Zionists had taken over the management of immigration, and had constructed over 40 agrarian settlements in the region. The purchase of large tracts of land and the development of collective farms (kibbutzim) facilitated Zionist control of the immigrants and exclusion of Arab farmers from the land. The wave of immigration came to a halt at the beginning of the First World War in 1914.

With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the British and French combined their influence in the Middle East. The British gained control of Palestine, Transjordan and modern Iraq. The British officer, T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), worked to win the support of local Arabs, but the frustration and grievance cultivated under Ottoman rule grew when the British Government denied Arabs independence (the Balfour Letter of 1917 and Balfour Declaration of 1926).

After the end of WWI, the British Mandate allowed 16,500 Jews annually into the area to settle. However, within a couple of years some restrictions were imposed due to the escalation of Arab protest against Jewish immigration. Around the same time the US and other western nations closed their borders to Jews, and many of the poorer Jewish people, mostly from Eastern European countries, continued to immigrate to Palestine.

By 1940, the number of Jewish immigrants in Palestine had reached 215,000; most of whom had left territories in Central Europe due to the Nazi regime. After the war, thousands more homeless Jews, including many Holocaust survivors, fled Europe for Palestine.

The Jewish radical group Irgun (led by Menachem Begin, who served as Prime Minister during the 1970's) set a particularly dangerous precedent in their struggle for a Zionist state when they bombed the King David Hotel on July 22nd, 1946.

In 1948 the Jewish State of Israel was declared. However, this was not terra nullius. This was a country populated by Arabs but now dominated by the Zionists; two peoples with distinct histories, religions, languages and cultures. Jews owned merely seven percent of the lands of Palestine and numbered about one-third of the population before statehood, yet they were granted more than half of Palestine land despite the Arab Muslim majority.

The Syrian, Egyptian, Transjordan, Iraqi and Saudi Arabian armies supported the Palestinians in the 1948 war with Israel. However, Zionist militias such as Irgun and the Stern Gang infiltrated Palestinian areas, attacking Arab civilian populations, causing many families to flee. Other Palestinians were expelled by Jewish forces, and many more were urged to flee by Syria. During this war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to abandon their homes and farms at gunpoint or under threat of violence. This land was seized by Israel, permitting and facilitating the Jewish colonisation process and consolidating its territorial foothold.

During and after the war, some 700,000 Palestinians left or were expelled from Israel. The State of Israel now covers 78% of the territory of historic Palestine.

The term Zionism historically refers to the international political movement in support of a homeland for the Jewish people. The movement continues to support Israel as a homeland
for Jewish people, however, it is important to note that not all Jewish people are Zionists, that not all Zionists are Jewish, and that Zionism is not confined to the State of Israel. Indeed, there is strong international support and involvement with the movement. Furthermore, within Zionism there are a range of viewpoints concerning the justification, past, present and future of the State of Israel. Accordingly, several distinct categories of Zionists are apparent but are not necessarily in agreement with one another.

1.3 GEOGRAPHY

The total area of Israel is 20,770 sq km – about a third of the size of Tasmania. Currently the West Bank’s total area is 5,860 sq km while the Gaza Strip is 360 sq km. Thus, combined the Occupied Territories have an area comparable to the tract of land between Clare to the north of Adelaide, and McLaren Vale to the south.

Within the region of Palestine/Israel, the Occupied Territories currently comprises around 20% of the total area, however, the 1947 UN Partition of Palestine allocated 45% of the land to the proposed Palestinian state.

Israel is bordered by Egypt on the south-west, Jordan and Syria to the east and Lebanon to the north. The Gaza Strip is situated on the south-western side of Israel and the West Bank is mostly enclosed within the north-eastern area. The West Bank is so named as it is on the western side of the Jordan River. Jerusalem straddles the West Bank/Israeli border and East Jerusalem is the proposed site for the capital of a future Palestinian State.

1.4 DEMOGRAPHICS

There are nearly 2.5 million Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank, and nearly 1.5 million Palestinian Arabs in the Gaza Strip. I was told that there were around 450,000 Jewish settlers living in the West Bank. It is estimated that there are between 3 and 5.5 million Palestinians in Jordan which is over half of the Jordanian population. Of the Palestinians living within Israel and the Occupied Territories, around 90% are Muslim (mostly Sunnis), and 10% are Christian or other. The main languages spoken in the Occupied Territories are Arabic and Hebrew, and English is widely understood.

As of May 2006, Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics reports that 77% of Israel’s 7 million people are Jews, 18.5% are Arabs and 4.3% are “others”. Of the Jewish population, 68% were born in Israel, the remainder being primarily from Europe and the Americas, with a smaller number from Asia and Africa (including the Arab countries).

Of the 1.08 million Israeli Arab population (including Muslims, Christians, Druze and Bedouin) 200,000 to 345,000 are internally displaced, ie, people who lost their homes in 1948 (and their decedents). This number represents a small fraction of the world’s Palestinian refugees, but is significant within Israel, and particularly in the Galilee communities.

More than half of Israel’s population is concentrated in the coastal region, while the Galilee and the Negev are comparatively under-populated. With around 300 people per square kilometre, Israel has one of the highest population densities in the world. However, Gaza has over ten times this rate; 3,600 people per square kilometres.
The region of Palestine/Israel has a rich and complex but divisive religious history. Controversy and conflict have resulted over some of the key religious sites, not least of all the Al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount site in East Jerusalem. I visited many sites of religious significance throughout my travels.

While looking around the Old City, I joined throngs of Al-Aqsa prayer-goers, although I could not enter the mosque due to non-Muslims being banned from entry since the 2000 Intifada. It is the largest mosque in Jerusalem, accommodating up to 5,000 people. The Waqf, a Muslim council currently has full administration of the mosque.

I took the walk down the Via Dolorosa in the Old City. It is a trail dedicated to the different stations and episodes in the final journey of Jesus. Various shrines, icons and churches are dotted along the way, and the journey culminates in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is believed to be Jesus’ final burial place. There are huge icons, shrines and monuments, although very little is left of the original setting which would’ve been more open space. It does contain the catacomb of Joseph of Arimathea, who apparently laid Jesus’ body to rest. Although the accuracy of these sites is in question, the Bishop of Eusebius identified some of them in the 3rd century at the request of Empress Helen of the Byzantine era, in the quest for a more elaborate record of the story.

Located around the old city are other sites of religious significance which I inspected. In the Garden of Gethsemane is a church dedicated to the remembrance of Jesus’ agony about whether to enter Jerusalem for the last time. It is claimed that he sat and pondered the situation at this site, which is located close to the eastern wall of Jerusalem. Overlooking the Garden of Gethsemane is the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives offers panoramic views of the city and as a place that Jesus was said to have frequented, it has significance for other stories of Jesus’ life and death. It is the site of many important biblical events, and is identified in the Book of Zachariah as the site where God will begin to redeem the dead at the end of days. Accordingly, many Jews seek burial on the mountain.

The Wailing Wall, also known as the Western Wall, is the only known existing wall at the site of the old Jewish temple. I saw Orthodox Jews coming to the Wall to pray and place written petitions in holes in the wall, observing strict protocol pertaining to dress requirements and the separation of men and women. The old Temple of Jerusalem was the most sacred building in Judaism, and accordingly this Western Wall the holiest location accessible to Jews for prayer.

While in Haifa I visited the Baha’i gardens. The Baha’i faith started in Persia in the 19th century. It has a strong influence on peace and emphasises the importance of working to serve humanity. The Baha’i faith recognises all religions and advocates unity of God and equality of mankind. It promotes the need for a world government, and has consultative status with various United Nations agencies and the World Health Organisation. Although there are only several million members worldwide, Baha’ism is recognised as one of the widest-spread religions, with membership extending to over 200 countries and ranging across different ethnic and social groups.

Elsewhere in my travels I visited the Mount of Beatitudes, where there is a magnificent Italian-designed church. When in Bethlehem I went through the Church of the Nativity, where I was shown the very spot where Jesus was born. In Nazareth I visited the Church of the Annunciation where I saw the grotto of the Virgin Mary. On the way to Tiberius I also...
stopped in at a shrine to Jethro, which is protected as a Druze shrine. The Druze are, on the face of it, one of the sects of Islam, primarily based in Lebanon and Syria. There are, however, several Druze villages in Galilee (northern Israel). They are distinct from other Arab Israelis in that they can and do serve in the Israeli Defence Force. I also had the privilege of visiting the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron and the Al Jazzar mosque in Acre.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning at this point, that in my travels, I met with Father Chehade, a representative of Clergy for Peace. The Clergy for Peace organisation is comprised of Christian, Jewish and Muslim members. The organisation’s primary aim is to work towards peace, justice and co-existence.
2. OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

2.1 POLITICS

One senior Palestinian characterised the apparent Israeli attitude as follows: "If you cannot clear them out or wipe them out, then fence them in". This statement illustrates the frustration felt by Palestinian residents of the West Bank, who are currently living in what is effectively a ghetto (created by 'The Separation Wall', checkpoints, curfews and a strong Israeli Defence Force presence).

One of the key issues affecting Palestinians today is The Separation Wall (also called the Security Wall by some Zionists and the Annexation Wall by opponents). Construction of The Wall was endorsed by George Bush after a meeting on April 14, 2004 with former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to discuss a unilateral disengagement plan. At the time, there was pressure on Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. This included the withdrawal of all Jewish-Israeli settlers, destruction of all settlements, removing Israel's military presence and destroying all military installations in Gaza.

In return for Israel's withdrawal, Sharon proposed building The Wall as a border between Israel and the West Bank, which would encroach upon the internationally agreed 1967 border to incorporate major Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank to be a part of Israel. In addition, Israel managed to negotiate that it did not have to recognise the Right of Return of refugees and that there would be no further pressure from the US for Israel to negotiate with Palestinians.

Following Yasir Arafat's death in 2004, Mahmud Abbas was elected PA president in January 2005. The Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, won control of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in January 2006, since which time the international community has refused to accept the Palestinian government on the grounds that Hamas refuses to recognise the State of Israel and will not renounce violence.

President Abbas (whom I met in Ramallah) has attempted to negotiate Peace platforms with Hamas in order to re-establish international funding and recognition, and to lift the current economic downturn. However, in late 2006 the PLC was unable to convene due to Israel's detention of 41 PLC members, and to travel restrictions imposed by Israel on other PLC members.

I also met with three women members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) from different political parties. Despite their differing political viewpoints they shared a passionate commitment to a free and independent Palestine.

Dr Mustafa Barghouti is a democracy activist and was candidate for presidency of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 2005, finishing second to Mahmoud Abbas. He is a medical doctor and has received a degree in management from Stanford University in the United States.

When I met with Dr Barghouti, he had just returned from an unofficial conference in Madrid, where all parties represented called to reconvene the Israeli Peace Conference. He discussed the new 'interim' phase the Israelis are proposing, claiming that it will only buy more time for Israel to confiscate more land and further strengthen their position.

Dr Barghouti pointed out that without international pressure, the expansion of Israeli settlements and borders will continue, and ultimately their position will be enhanced. For example, as The Wall, checkpoints and IDF continue to restrict labour and movement, the
potential for the development of a Palestinian state is hampered by the falling economy and political conflict.

Racial discrimination is commonly applied on various levels to Arabs within Israel and the Occupied Territories. For example, Israel is allocated more than six times the amount of water per capita than Palestine, despite paying the same rates and taxes. Dr Barghouti pointed out that this is the longest occupation in modern history. Despite Palestine having the most democratic system in the Arab world, the President cannot move within the Occupied Territories without official Israeli permission.

Ultimately, a decision needs to be made between a one- or two-State solution, and a concept of citizenship must be created in Palestine if the latter is to be adopted. Any future strategy relies on the ability to define the Palestinian position, the mobilisation of international pressure and a significant increase in positive forces for Peace within Israel. The current occupation also harms the Israeli community – there is a moral decay taking place.

Dr Barghouti discussed a necessity to change the current Palestinian political system. At present, it is neither Presidential nor Parliamentary; the degree of authority held by the President fluctuates depending upon the leader. For example, when Yasir Arafat was in power his popularity commanded greater authority and the roles were adjusted accordingly. Dr Barghouti insists that the rules and responsibilities must be clearly defined; that democracy 'on paper' needs to be fostered.

He also discussed the persistence of strong patronage networks with political parties. Democracy can only be developed by breaking down the feudal hierarchy of political parties and encouraging a market economy. However, given current economic constraints, and US support for Fatah, democracy is difficult to establish. The US claims to encourage democratic political processes, but by support and funding that remains contingent on the election of one particular political party they are undermining democracy in the region.

A key issue at present is the Palestinian police force. With some 86 thousand officers, they cost around a third of the budget. The recent change in leadership has resulted in greater numbers of Hamas recruits.

There is nothing in the current constitution that allows the President to dissolve the Parliament, only the Parliament can do that. The President can only call for a presidential election.

I also met with Saeb Erekat, who has participated in various peace negotiations with Israel, including Camp David in 2000, and is currently the Chief Palestinian negotiator. He has a BA and MA in International Relations and a Doctorate in Peace Studies.

Broadly, there are three options for the future of Palestine/Israel: two-state, one-state or apartheid. Political pluralism must prevail over authoritarianism, because as much as peace is needed, democratic processes must be adhered to. There are many variables in the region. It is politically and economically unstable and the future is uncertain, but Erekat, like most Palestinians and Israelis I spoke to, favours a two-state solution.

Erekat pointed out that a dilemma of being Palestinian is that internationally, many want to take up the Palestinian cause, eg, Iran, Iraq, Syria etc. However, rather than fighting wars on their behalf, aggression must be curtailed and instead, Israel should be shamed and subject to international scrutiny, pressure and accountability for its actions. It should be a matter of international justice and human rights, and not reduced to an 'Arab' or 'Muslim' issue. Palestine should be left to fight its own battles and find its own way politically.
2.2  ECONOMY

The Occupied Territories currently face a raft of economic issues. The beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000 signified a sharp economic downturn, mostly related to Israeli security policies that continue to disrupt labour and trade access. Israeli military measures have also caused the disruption and destruction of capital, administrative structures and have caused widespread closure of Palestinian businesses. Unemployment rates sit at around 30%, while 80% of inhabitants live below the poverty line. Persistent Israeli military activities within the Territories and at the borders also hinder opportunities for growth. The occupied territories face difficulties in exporting products due to strict Israeli control of all borders including airports, roads and sea ports.

A recent problem has been the international community’s financial embargo since Hamas took office in early 2006. In the year prior to the election, foreign funding of $1.3 billion contributed to the PA’s $1.9 billion annual budget. Nearly all of this funding was withdrawn, including the European Union’s annual donation of $600 million. Minimal funding has been reinstated, mostly in the form of humanitarian aid due to projections by the World Bank that if the embargo continues, the Occupied Territories will be in a deep depression within a year, with unemployment rates rising to 47% and GDP declining by 27%.

The EU and countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Russia are providing direct aid, however there is still a massive shortfall and PA salaries can still only be paid at around 60%. Many cannot afford to pay school tuition fees and around $360 million in private sector loans are unable to be recovered; the economy is suffering as a whole. Furthermore, Dr Mohammad Mustapha, Economic Advisor to the President advised that around US $50 to $60 million per month owed to the PA by Israel in tax and customs revenue has been withheld since the elections. This decision has been backed by the Bush Administration.

The median salary for Arabs in East Jerusalem is 4,000 shekels (around AU $1,200) per month. With the median rent being around 1,500 shekels, plus bills and poll tax, average wage-earners are unable to save and are financially worse off with a family.

One industry showing some promise is the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector. I met with a representative of the industry, who advised that there has been a 46% growth in the last two years in the local IT market. This indicates a good opportunity for exporting software development and other IT-related services. In respect of Israel itself, I gathered that there could be considerable benefits for Australian companies in learning from and trading in defence technology and water technology, areas in which the Israelis excel.

2.3  EDUCATION

Palestinian literacy rates are quoted at around 97% for men and 87% for women. In 2006, there were just over 3,000 educational institutions from pre-school to tertiary level in the Occupied Territories, catering to just over 1.1 million students. There are a total of eleven universities and nine colleges in the region, which cater to 113,000 students. During the second Intifada, 850 schools were closed and 185 schools were fired upon by the IDF, eleven of which were completely destroyed. There were 216 Palestinian children killed, and 2,500 injured on their way to or from school. In Ar-Ram, half of the 15,000 school children are being cut off from their schools now that The Wall is being constructed there.

Currently, the high school dropout rate for Palestinian students is twice as high as that of Israeli students, and there’s a severe shortage of schools in Arab areas. The State of Israel currently spends around US $1,100 per annum on Jewish students and US $190 on Arab
students. Many Palestinian students have difficulty accessing education. Checkpoints and The Wall are major problems; the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics reports that in areas annexed to The Wall, 24% of non-tertiary students have had to change schools, while 43% have had to change routes and at least 74% have been absent due to the closure of checkpoints. More than 1,300 schools have been affected by curfews, sieges and closures.

I visited Al Quds University, which is situated across East Jerusalem and the West Bank and is the only Arab university in Jerusalem. It was formed in 1995, when various colleges in the area were combined. The university is currently facing a major and unprecedented financial and operational crisis, caused by the dire economic and social situation in the area. Steady subsidies are not available, and the university is unable to charge its students full tuition fees commensurate with real costs. Recent contributions from Arab governments alleviated the crisis somewhat, enabling the university to pay a portion of the salaries of its 723 support staff employees and faculty members. This temporary, one-time assistance made it possible to re-start the present academic year.

Serviced by some 400 academics, Al Quds has 8,300 students across 12 faculty areas and 30 centres/institutes. The university also offers short courses in Arabic for foreign students. There are less than 100 Masters and PhD students, and the University provides some community services such as legal and health services. The fees constitute 64% of the budget income, but with the current economic failure students often cannot pay their fees. The total budget is $15 million per annum, compared with the Hebrew University which receives $400 million per annum. Arab Israeli taxpayers in Israel pay the same rates of tax as other Israelis.

Al Quds previously had more EU donors, but funding has been reduced and redirected to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Originally contributing some $20 million per annum, the EU now provides around half of that amount. The PA does not contribute the whole amount to the University, but recently, Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Bank have been acting as donors. In addition, the Japanese government has been donating equipment, and Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian funds have been created to establish scholarships.

Student fees are payable for registration and tuition hours, and are usually at around US $1,200 per annum plus books. Lacking the funds to pay in full, many students are allowed to pay according to their ability. Getting to university is also difficult for many students. There are many checkpoints en route, preventing or delaying access so that students must make up classes or apply to re-sit exams. Many academics believe that Israeli universities should be boycotted, however, a minority believe that collaboration with Israeli academics is more of a help to the situation. Collaborators are often required to justify their position.

Al Quds has a faculty of Law which covers Israeli Law, West Bank/Gaza Law and Jordanian Law. Israel does not recognise any of the degrees conferred by the Al Quds University, despite worldwide recognition. However, there is one possible exception; Law. Around a third of Al Quds students hold an Israeli ID card, some of whom may be permitted to sit the Israeli exams to be admitted to practise law. This may be approved by the Dean of the Hebrew University, however, no other faculty can get such recognition. They continually fight battles in court to gain academic recognition in Israel.

There are no Jewish students due to the accreditation issue, but sometimes Jewish-Israeli staff teach there. Christian students make up around 3% of the population, the remainder being mostly Muslim Arabs. Student organisations are active, and currently the majority are pro-Fatah but for during the initial years there were many 'fundamentalist' Muslim groups. The student organisations at Al Quds, along with other Arab Universities have pledged non-violence.
The University has its own local television broadcasting station. Koranic and Islamic studies are offered, and the official platform is for academic and philosophical enquiry rather than religious exposure. Similar to the Investigator Science Centre in Adelaide, the Science faculty offers a Science Museum for over one million Palestinian children.

2.4 HEALTH

The health of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories is deteriorating due to the ongoing conflict, border closures and curfews. Health care services are hindered by restrictions on movement, and humanitarian relief is sporadic. Most patients requiring an ambulance have to make their own way to meet the ambulance at a checkpoint; only 30% of the calls are picked up from their homes. Lack of water, adequate food supplies and sanitation are contributing to the problem. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that the overall physical and mental health of Palestinians – especially children – has been declining significantly over recent years. Other contributing factors to the deterioration in health include severe damage to social and commercial infrastructure, lack of human waste disposal and the physical and mental suffering caused by human casualties of the conflict.

According to UNICEF, the life expectancy of Palestinians in the OPT is 73, compared with 80 in Israel. The infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births in the OPT is 21, five times higher than in Israel, and the maternal mortality rate is 140 per 100,000 live births – which is among the highest in the world. It is estimated that more than 40 women have died while waiting for urgent medical attention at checkpoints over the last six years. Permits are required to travel from the West Bank to Israel; accordingly the parents of Palestinian children travelling to Israel for specialist cancer treatment are not always allowed to accompany their children, who must travel alone.

There are around 160 NGOs in the health sector, most of which are community based and focussed on primary health care. There is only one NGO currently providing tertiary care. Many NGOs attempt to adopt modern policies concerning community health models with the aim of empowering people to take care of their own health. Health rights for citizens, or health insurance, is one of the largest sectors.

According to some sources, there has been an increase in cancer among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories since occupation. This may be due to the use of toxic gasses and other poisons as weapons, although this is anecdotal. Environmental pollutants are a key concern. For example, a chemical factory that produces pesticides was relocated from Netanya in Israel to the outskirts of Tulkarem in the West Bank. This was due to complaints that it was exposing local Jewish-Israelis to chemical toxins. In its new location, on near the Israeli/West Bank border, locals claim that when the wind blows west towards Israel the factory is shut down, and when the wind blows east it is re-opened.

2.5 CIVIL SOCIETY AND NGOS

The Occupied Territories are currently facing a host of challenges. Some key issues include housing, transport, economy, industry and infrastructure; in particular the availability of drinking water since water management was taken out of Palestinian hands in 1967. Historically, the provision of human services and security has predominantly fallen to Palestinian NGOs. At present, there are some 1,500 functioning Palestinian NGOs responsible for around 50% of political and civil activity. There are 10,000 to 20,000 Palestinians working within the NGO sector, which is supported primarily by donations from Palestinians and external funding sources.
Significant NGO funding has traditionally been received from local operations and activities; however, due in part to the failing economy, this has diminished over recent years. Within Israel there are more than 7,000 Jewish-Israeli volunteers involved with monitoring and recording human rights abuses. They investigate issues such as housing demolitions, search and arrest orders and administrative detention.

I met with representatives of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organisations Network (PNGO). PNGO is a secular, civil and democratic umbrella organisation facilitating coordination, cooperation and consultation among its 92 NGO members. It was established in 1993 after the signing of the Oslo Accords with the purpose of strengthening and uniting Palestinian civil society in accordance with the principles of social justice, democracy and sustainable development. The member organisations represent a range of interests and areas at local, regional and international levels.

The PNGO operates on six strategic levels:

1. Networking - for example, human rights, agriculture and the promotion of integration;
2. Facilitation of services 'on the ground' and enhancing the democratic applications;
3. Lobbying and policy development on Palestinian family and social issues;
4. Lobbying and policy development at an Israeli level;
5. Training - civil society, culture and enhancing relationships;
6. Influencing Israeli donor's agendas.

The PNGO believes the last Palestinian elections were democratic and fair. However, in the context of the problems associated with the new Government Hamas, there were two views expressed. First, the Government was elected democratically and therefore it should be accepted; and second, that even though the Government was democratically elected, it should be opposed. Thus PNGO representatives preferred replacing the Government via elections. Some of the key issues have been the complete collapse of the Palestinian economy - around three quarters of the population are living on AUD 1.00 per day, a widespread sense of insecurity amongst Palestinians, and the inability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to preserve their integrity due to the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) targeting its infrastructure in the last 12 months.

Funded by a Swedish Women's Organisation, the Palestinian Working Women's Society for Development (PWWSD) in Tulkarem is an NGO dedicated to women's issues. Besides advocacy and access to justice, they provide a mechanism for Palestinian women to sell their products on the internet, and to generate more money coming into the community.

On our travels we stopped at a farmhouse near Tulkarem, and asked if we could use a toilet. We were invited in and welcomed, the woman rushing to lay out bread, olive oil and zata for the visitors. While waiting, we discussed her situation, and she told us how her husband had been taken by the IDF and held for two years without due process. She also spoke of a fire in the village some years ago, whereby the fire-fighters were prevented entry and over 3,000 olive trees were destroyed. She came from a middle class background, where like most Australians, she enjoyed a modest standard of living. The current decline in circumstances has meant that she has had change her way of life in her 40s, for example making her own bread. Despite appearing to have very little, as we left she insisted that we take oranges and bananas for the journey.

I met with a representative of The Holy Land Trust (HLT), which employs 12 Journalists, 15 full-time staff and 30 part-time staff. Based in Bethlehem, HLT members travel through the Occupied Territories, offering training in non-violence and empowerment for Palestinians. They have set up the first Palestinian newsagency, and conduct radio and television broadcasting out of Bethlehem.
2.6 HOUSING

Compensation has never been offered to displaced Palestinians. The problem is exacerbated by a lack of building permits being issued; the few displaced Palestinians that may be able to relocate are unable to obtain a building permit. This is achieved through the ‘planning system’ in the West Bank which is implemented by the Civil Administration (Israel’s military government that rules the Occupied Territories).

The planning system governs the approval and issue of building and road construction permits. It has taken power from the Palestinian planning institutions, and issues permits to facilitate Jewish development while hindering the development of Palestinian communities. Most Palestinian development applications are rejected, and Palestinian buildings constructed without approval are demolished by the Civil Administration, even when they are on private land.

I visited the Tent of Nations, a peace project for youth on a farm which had been ordered to take down its tent structures. The farmer has tried but failed to get approval for basic additions such as a patio or temporary tent erection.

I met with the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHD). ICAHD is committed to opposing and resisting land confiscation, settlement expansion, road construction, closure and separation policies and the destruction of Palestinian housing and land. Membership of the Israeli organisation has grown over recent years. I was told of Palestinian homes being “accidentally” demolished when residents are at home, and of houses being demolished with the residents’ belongings inside.

According to the UN, less than six percent of the thousands of houses that have been demolished since 1967 have involved security suspects – the remaining 94% are ordinary Palestinians who happen to live on land flagged for Israeli development.

2.7 INFRASTRUCTURE

The Israeli/Palestinian region is characterised by an arid and semi-arid climate. Drinking water is increasingly scarce, the availability of which is becoming a welfare issue for Palestinians. The Occupied Territories are facing shortages, especially the elevated areas of the West Bank, which has a similar climate to Adelaide with 560 mm average rainfall. Although this area is has an abundance of renewable water resources compared to the rest of the Middle East, Israel’s restrictions on drilling for water, planting and irrigation placed on the Palestinians have significantly reduced the amount of water available to the Palestinian population.

Israeli policies result in most of the water from the West Bank filtering underground to Israel so that Israeli settlers are provided with preferential access to water resources. Consequently, a “man-made” water crisis is currently further impacting on the living conditions of the Palestinians. The PA and Israeli Government are currently in negotiations concerning comprehensive and fair allocation of the water resources of the Jordan River basin, West Bank aquifers and the Gaza aquifer.

It is estimated that about 150 thousand cubic metres are currently available intermittently for Palestinians, whereas 600 thousand cubic metres is available for Israelis. Where this quota is exceeded, it is taken out of the following years supply. While 85% of Palestinians have pipes for water, most do not have water for their pipes, and must pay four times the amount
that settlers pay for their water, despite the same contributions to rates and taxes. The small village of Jubara must wait for fortnightly deliveries of water, which is often not drinkable.

In the West Bank there is currently one Telecommunications service provider and one mobile phone company. Around 27% of households own a computer, and 9.2% have internet access. Many smaller cities and villages face energy crises. For example, Jubara has not had electricity for 18 years, and though a generator has been purchased, it is unreliable. For energy residents must rely on gas canisters, solar panels and candles. Nearby Tulkarem has not had reliable electricity for the past 16 years. Lack of development approvals and IDF shelling and bombing has contributed to the decline in infrastructure over the past several years.

The financial embargo from international sources of funding has also contributed to the decline in infrastructure. Unpaid salaries and uncollected taxes have caused cuts to basic services, such as rubbish collection in Gaza City and sanitation and sewerage systems in other urban centres. Schools and hospitals have also suffered, running short of vital equipment. Patients have died as a result of rolling back dialysis treatment and chemotherapy, and some patients have had to forgo painkillers and anaesthetics.

Palestinian roads are well below the standard of Israeli roads. While Palestinians contribute the same rates of taxation, Israeli roads connecting Jewish settlements are maintained more regularly and to a higher standard. Palestinian roads are often too narrow, have many potholes and are far more congested. Only cars with Israeli number plates are permitted to travel on the highways connecting the settlements.

### 2.8 HUMAN RIGHTS

"reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours..."

- Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, 26 June 1945.

Israel applies Israeli Civil law to settlers and settlements within the Occupied Territories. The Palestinians in the same regions are subject to Israeli military law, which has resulted in a regime of legalised separation and discrimination. It is the enforcement of two separate legal systems in the same territory, with the rights of individuals being based on their nationality. This is why many critics call the system "apartheid".

Israel’s military orders declare the Jewish settlements as “closed military zones” in which Palestinians are forbidden to enter without authorisation. However, Israeli citizens, Jews from anywhere in the world and tourists are all permitted to enter these areas without special authorisation. Foreigners of Palestinian origin “may be subject to special restrictions” (US State Department). This system of apartheid and discriminatory laws is justified as necessary for ‘security measures’, as are the many other Israeli State and IDF actions against Palestinians, such as construction of The Separation Wall, checkpoints, frequent searches and administrative detentions.

There are 18 human rights organisations in the Occupied Territories, operating in different fields of human rights. One of the representatives I met with was from Al Haq. Established in the late 1970s, it was the first such organisation in the Middle East. One of the key issues
that gave rise to such Human Rights organisations was the lack of prisoner representation. Roughly 50% of 18 to 60 year olds males in the Occupied Territories have been in gaol.

The military orders applied in the Territories are not widely published; many learn of certain laws only when they are arrested. There are currently around 11,000 Palestinians held in Administrative detention without charges. Prisoners are detained for years for unclear 'administrative' reasons, or for what we would consider petty crime, often with no trial and no evidence. A determinant for detention is that the presiding judge needs to be convinced that the individual poses a threat. There is no such law under Israeli Civil law, and the files concerning such cases are secret.

Founded in 1979, Al Haq was the first human rights organisation in the Middle East. The purpose of Al Haq is to protect and promote human rights and the rule of law in the Occupied Territories, and they have special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. I met with Shawan Jabarin, General Director of Al Haq to discuss human rights in the Palestinian/Israeli context.

Jabarin said that nothing perpetrated by the Israelis is considered an 'isolated incident' by Al Haq. All actions are connected despite, for example, the IDF claiming that a certain civil rights violation was merely an 'isolated incident'. There are too many to be a coincidence, and there are patterns that indicate they are deliberate. Jabarin pointed out that Israel continues to defy international law by constructing the Wall, whereby farmers are separated from their farmlands, and if they do not farm their land for 3 years, as occurs due to hardship or inability to access, the land becomes state-owned.

In response to the question of what can be done about the situation from Australia, Jabarin said to raise the question to the government about what it is doing to ensure Israel acts in accordance with International Law. At present, Australia sympathises with Israel in the United Nations.

I also met with a representative of Al-Dameer Association, a Legal Service orientated human rights organisation. They discussed Occupation as a policy to punish the majority, both individually and collectively for Israeli interests. Since 1976, over half a million Palestinians in the Occupied Territories have been arrested, which equates to nearly half of the adult male population. Israeli military law deems any kind of Palestinian State operations illegal; for example being a member of a political party. Palestinian Authority police officers have even been arrested for 'illegal possession of a gun'.

Professional or student unions are illegal. The Palestinian flag is illegal, as is the United Nations Resolution on SC Res 1947 – 1982, a UN book. Palestinians can be arrested or stopped by any Israeli soldier or settler, arrested and held for eight days without charge, which can be extended to 18 days or even six months if held in 'administrative detention'. The IDF courts, including judges, prosecution and intelligence officers are all members of the same army division. Prisoners are subject to isolation, confinement, harassment and denial of family visits.

There are currently 10,500 political prisoners and 181 Palestinians held in administrative detention. In addition there are around 400 children held as political prisoners. Since 1967 there have been at least 169 deaths in custody. Al-Dameer Association has Israeli legal interns working for them, and their figures on prisoners are used by the Red Cross.

I also met with a representative from the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). She discussed the high levels of poverty, poor health, restrictions on movement and other issues faced by Palestinians that are brought about by
the oppressive Israeli Occupation. In particular, the hundreds of checkpoints and The Wall hinder access to school, work, hospital and family on a daily basis.

In Jerusalem I met with members of the Christian Peacemaker's Team (CTP) while attending a Women in Black rally. The Woman in Black have been protesting against the occupation in the centre of Jerusalem every Friday for 19 years. The CPT formed in 1984 to devote time, energy and self-sacrifice to non-violent peacemaking, specifically to counteract the energy that armies devote to war. They operate by maintaining a presence in areas of conflict, and are present in Israel and the Occupied Territories at the invitation of local peace and human rights groups. They participate in "unarmed intervention", public witness and non-violent direct action with the aim of protecting human rights.

2.9 REFUGEES/RIGHT OF RETURN

According to the latest UN figures, at April 2006 there were just under 4.4 million Palestinian refugees. Around 1.3 million of these are living in one of the 59 official refugee camps within Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza. Nineteen of these camps are located throughout the West Bank, containing around 200,000 refugees. In Gaza there are just under half a million refugees in camps, and another half a million registered refugees who are not residents of one of the eight official camps.

Border closures imposed on the West Bank by Israel are posing a serious problem for camp residents, many of whom are dependent on income from work in Israel. Unable to gain access to work, unemployment rates have risen and socio-economic conditions within the refugee camps have deteriorated. The West Bank camps have active camp committees, considered the official body to represent the camp population. In conjunction with the Committees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) sponsors community programs for women, disabled people and youth.

UNRWA also provides education, healthcare, social services and emergency aid to all Palestinian refugees in the area, and is the largest UN operation in the Middle East. Many of the 27,000 staff are refugees themselves; including nurses, doctors, teachers and social workers who work directly to assist their communities. In addition, the Palestinian Authority and several NGOs provide services for West Bank refugees. However, the provision of services is hampered by many constraints, for example, many schools have been damaged by IDF activity since September 2000, and classrooms are overcrowded with an average of 50 students per class, and many must operate in rented premises. Similar problems are evident in other over-burdened services; doctors in some areas must attend to an average of 90 patients per day.

I visited the Aida Refugee camp near Bethlehem in the West Bank. Now home to some 4,500 refugees, it began in 1948 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were evicted by Jewish soldiers. In its early days there were up to 18,000 people living in an area of land just over one square kilometre. It was officially established in the 1950s by the UN and it now covers an area of 60 square kilometres. The PA services building was recently bombed by an IDF F16, which has resulted in a lack of healthcare and civil administration. Understandably, there is great hostility felt here towards the IDF. Most of the residents are Muslim, but there are some Christians.

The camp has a youth centre and a library, and there are two schools with just under 2,000 students in attendance. Camp residents spoke of the frequent IDF presence and the psychological effects this is having on children, causing problems such as bedwetting and sleep disturbances. Soldiers come to the camp every night to search and arrest; last month a mother and daughter were arrested and put in gaol for unknown reasons. Recently, ten
children aged 12 to 14 were also arrested, and residents are frequently interrogated, beaten and exposed to harsh conditions. It is reported that soldiers often destroy property and fire gas bombs in the area.

I was told of some children who were recently playing on the roof with plastic guns. The IDF fired live bullets at the children, and two were seriously injured. Children as young as two years old think of Israeli soldiers as shooting. Many families knew someone killed or arrested during the Intifada. One family spoke of how their father was killed when they were eating breakfast. He had heard a noise outside and when he looked out onto the street he was shot in the head and killed by Israeli soldiers from the Intercontinental Hotel. His daughters remain traumatised and cannot eat breakfast or participate in communal feasts any more. Another issue is the lack of drinking water, which is only intermittently available and residents are in need of containers to store water.

The sheer number of Palestinian refugees and the dire conditions under which they live is viewed as one of the biggest problems in the Middle East. Under international law, they are entitled to return to their homes and land. But for many, homes no longer exist, having been demolished or confiscated for Jewish settlers. Those that do still have homes are not permitted to return by the IDF, and there is simply no place else to go.

Palestinian sociologist Khalil Shkaki recently conducted extensive surveys among refugee groups. The results indicated that only around 10% of refugees would actually choose to return Israel, and most of those were aged refugees. The remainder indicated they would be happy to be resettled in a Palestinian State or to be offered compensation to settle in another Arab country or other places in the world, such as Australia and Canada. To begin the healing process, refugees want their right of return acknowledged by Israel, and for Israel to accept responsibility in originally driving them from their homeland.

2.10 SETTLEMENTS

In this context, settlements are Jewish homes or villages initiated in the Occupied Territories, particularly after 1967. Opponents of this practice might call them colonies rather than settlements. When I spoke to Jewish people living in settlements, they preferred to simply call them Jewish communities. It seems that the term "settlement" has become pejorative in Israeli discourse.

"The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies."

- Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949

Settlements and International Law

Occupying powers are prohibited from transferring citizens of its own territory to the occupied territory under the Fourth Geneva Convention, article 49. Settlement establishment and expansion is accordingly a violation of international human rights law. However, settlers argue that the Israeli/West Bank 1967 ceasefire-line border (the Green Line) is an arbitrary line – it is not a 'real' border, and the Jewish Israelis have a God-given right to the land. Israelis also argue that the international convention does not apply to the West Bank because it was not under legitimate sovereignty of any state in the first place.

Over the last few decades more than 50% of land in the West Bank has been taken over by Israel, using complex legal and bureaucratic mechanisms. This land is reserved for exclusive use by settlers, resulting in the displacement of former Palestinian residents.
Palestinian houses are demolished or confiscated and farmlands and crops are destroyed to make way for expanding settlements, or for Israeli industrial complexes that are strategically placed within Palestinian boundaries to avoid Israeli wage laws. Houses are also demolished for “security reasons” or “accidentally” by IDF shelling and bombs. Sometimes areas of farmland properties are confiscated, and the residents are denied access to their own farm gate and the road.

Israeli settlers can be divided into two categories. The ideological settlers believe that the West Bank and Gaza Strip are within the lands promised by God to Moses. There are also Israeli economic settlers who, finding land unaffordable land within Israel, take advantage of a cheaper option to have a new home. There is evidence that their development was strategically managed to facilitate expansion of Israeli borders if a two-state solution is finally agreed. The price of land is around US $250,000 per block, which is leased from the state on a long-term basis.

In April 2004, Israeli Prime Minster Ariel Sharon proposed a deal whereby in exchange for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip, a Separation Wall would be constructed as a border between the West Bank and Israel. The UN border established in 1967 was to be discarded, and Sharon made it clear that some of the Jewish settlement blocs within the West Bank would be strengthened. President Bush endorsed the strategy, agreeing that the settlements “will be an integral part of the State of Israel in any future agreement [with the Palestinians].”

The largest and most contentious settlement is Maale Adumim, which sits on a hill to the east of Jerusalem.

Maale Adumim

Home to more than 30,000 settlers, it has become a most serious Israeli/Palestinian issue and is illegal under international law. The Fourth Geneva Convention (article 49) prohibits an occupying power transferring citizens from its own territory to occupied territory. However, development of the settlement continues today, and attracts economic concessions from the Israeli Government. The Israeli position is that it is not a violation of the roadmap peace plan, whereby Israel agreed to halt all settlement building, but rather a necessity to meet the demands of “natural growth”. Israel also argues that international conventions relating to occupied land do not apply to the West Bank because they were not under the legitimate sovereignty of any state in the first place. Interestingly, no new Arab villages have been built, nor existing villages expanded within Israel since 1948, despite the considerably higher birth-rate among Arab Israelis.

The majority of construction workers in Maale Adumim are Palestinian. Unable to find work elsewhere, they accept that they must do whatever necessary to provide food for their families. Immediately north of the settlement lies an area called E1. Here Israel wishes to construct more houses, connected to east Jerusalem (about six kilometres away). According to Peace Now, the Israeli settlement watchdog, connection of settlements to east Jerusalem would be disastrous for Palestinians as it would prevent the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state by cutting off east Jerusalem from the remainder of the West Bank.

Hebron and the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH)

The ancient city of Hebron has a long and violent history spanning back centuries. A report of this size and context, however, can only examine the more recent events that impact on the city today. Jewish settlements in the area continue to expand; there are currently more than twenty located in and around the city.

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1 BBC, “Israel’s ‘linchpin’ settlement”, 12 November 2005
The settlers in Hebron attract criticism from other Israelis. They are viewed by some as an obstacle to peace, and that they should be completely removed from the region. There has been a history of violent conflict between settlers and Palestinians in the region. Notably, in 1994, Baruch Goldstein from Kiryat Arba shot and killed 29 Palestinians who were attending a prayer service at the Ibrahimi Mosque. The massacre was condemned by the UN Security Council, and a temporary international presence was called for in Hebron. Yasir Arafat declared that the PLO would not continue its peace negotiations with Israel until an agreement was reached to provide the city with international observers.

In March 1994, Israeli and PLO representatives signed an agreement for the provision of support staff and observers from Italy, Denmark and Norway. Thus, the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) was formed, with the key mandate to assist in promoting stability and restoring normal life in the city of Hebron. After Israeli-Palestinian disagreements led to a withdrawal of the TIPH in August 1994, the “Oslo II”, or “Taba” was ratified as the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Oslo II called for a partial redeployment of the IDF from Hebron, and for the establishment of another TIPH. The TIPH continues to be coordinated by Norway today, mainly for international monitoring and reporting on any human rights violations in the city. However, Palestinian perceptions of TIPH are that they are little more than useless observers, as they have little authority and the conditions imposed on the Palestinian community continue to worsen. I met with TIPH workers in Hebron.

The Hebron Agreement of Oslo II allowed the Jewish settlers to remain in the city, and tensions between settlers and Palestinians have not been quelled. Key streets of Hebron and its connecting routes to other settlements have been taken over for the settlers. Palestinian movement within Hebron is hampered by roadblocks, checkpoints, demolitions, curfews, IDF troops and rock-throwing from settlers. Access to Mosques, businesses, historic sites, friends and family, and even their own properties is restricted for many Palestinians in the area, and some 1,200 Palestinian shops have closed down due to the economic failure brought about by these conditions.

Palestinians are also subject to frequent house searches and ID checks. There have been reports of IDF soldiers crashing through the walls of houses from neighbouring apartments rather than using doors, theft of household pets, psychological disturbances in children and physical injury and property damage from settlers throwing objects down onto pedestrians. The IDF is actively involved in the expansion of the Jewish settlements; breaking into Palestinian homes and businesses and handing the properties over to settlers. During the second Intifada, Palestinians were under house arrest – lasting two to three years. Seventy five percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and the demand for food in one of the soup kitchens has increased from 80kg to 500kg per day over the past few years. Watching the throngs of children scramble in the soup kitchen I visited, desperate for food, was perhaps one of the most disturbing things I saw.

Speaking to some of the local Palestinians revealed some disturbing accounts of incidents that have taken place in Hebron. For example, in May 2005, a Palestinian man went downstairs in his house to investigate noises where his children were studying. He noticed that stones were being thrown at his house, and went out with a stick to confront the stone-throwers, but was blindfolded, handcuffed and arrested by Israeli soldiers. In the Hebron markets, a settler accidentally scratched her wrist, and the markets were consequently closed down for two months following the “incident”. There was an incident whereby a metal spike was thrown by a settler in an upstairs apartment onto an Arab man on his way to the Ibrahimi mosque, which I visited while in Hebron. It was embedded four inches inside his skull, but no settlers were investigated.
I was told of settlers poisoning Palestinian drinking water and farmlands around Hebron. In 2005, Israeli and Palestinian scientists analysed substances found on farmlands that had contaminated and killed some of the livestock. Two kinds of rat poison were found, and Amnesty International put out calls for the Israeli authorities to investigate and safely remove the poison as the areas concerned are under Israeli military control, and the Palestinian security services are prohibited by Israel from operating there. In the previous year, Israeli police claimed that they suspected settlers had poisoned a Palestinian well in the area.

I was told by Palestinians that settlers were induced by Israeli government offerings of subsidised health insurance, housing and utilities, but the settlers claimed it was offered under Rabin. In Hebron I met with a representative of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee which was established in 1996 to preserve Hebron as an Arab Palestinian city. They renovate houses and improve infrastructure, including sewerage, road works, fire-fighting bases and social clinics. There current projects are to restore the market and playground.

**Efrat Settlement**

I visited Efrat settlement to speak with a couple of settlers. They requested payment of US$100 in return for the meeting. I met with Artie, a Philanthropy Advisor whose role was to ensure that US monetary donations were being well-spent to develop the settlements, and with Herschel, a Patent Attorney. Both men had migrated to Israel from the US in the 1980s; seemingly economic settlers as well as sincere Zionists. When questioned about the problems within their settlement, they identified that their Social Services department is overworked.

Prior to 1948 there were four Jewish Kibbutzim in the area and the landscape was barren with rocky hills. The settlers claimed that there were no Palestinians living in the area until Jordan took over, at which point the Jewish Kibbutzim had to leave. Jewish settlers arrived back in the 1980s. Around 30 to 40% of the settlers speak English, and most commute to Jerusalem for work. The largest local industry is education and childcare, and there are a few small high-tech businesses. The settler’s support their claim to the land, asserting that there is insufficient vacant Israeli land and that there never was a Palestinian State.

The settlers spoke of how the ‘Green Line’ of 1967 is merely an arbitrary ‘cease-fire line’ on which the current borders have been based and accordingly, the borders have “no basis in fact, law or reality”. They deny the right of a Palestinian State to exist, which contradicts UN declarations. They claim that the Jewish connection to the land is historical and undeniable, and that anything offered to the Palestinians is purely a gesture of generosity and pragmatism. In addition, they don’t believe that an agreed Peace is possible, citing the Palestinian rejection of Camp David and a belief that Palestine would act violently if current IDF impositions were lifted. To argue for a *modus vivendi*, (a way of living) is another question.

The settlers acknowledge that the IDF will inevitably kill more Palestinians when violence erupts because the IDF is far superior in tactics and weaponry. Concerning the IDF destruction of civilian areas including hospitals and schools, the settlers assert that such areas must be “terrorist nests”, that the IDF would not target them if they were not. If it is bombed, then it should have been bombed. They also assert that most Israelis would agree to a two-state solution if Palestinians were a ‘peaceful’ neighbour. However, they claim that Hamas terror cells are a constant threat, and that to allow the Right of Return to Palestinian refugees would mean the end of the Jewish state; “if Palestinians put down their arms it would bring peace, if Israelis did it would be massacre”.

21
When asked of their views on Arabs, the Settlers spoke of a Hezbollah officer who confiscated Israeli wine from a Christian who entered Lebanon - that this is "what they are like". They also discussed their disappointment with the content of Haaretz, a Palestinian centre-left paper published in Israel. They claim to have a religious and historical connection to the land on which they reside; that it was promised to them by God, and though they were thrown out by the Romans, it is God's will for them to return. The secular Jewish justification for creation of the State of Israel tends to rely on a necessary response to anti-Semitism in Europe. They are not willing to accept or define borders. The word 'settlement' has become pejorative, and settlers now prefer to use the term 'community'.

2.11 CHECKPOINTS AND THE SEPARATION WALL

The West Bank continues to shrink despite Palestinian developments on the land. This is attributable to the ongoing construction of The Separation Wall by Israel, to divide it from the West Bank. Some 90% of the Wall is built inside the UN-established 1967 border of the West Bank. The path of The Wall is predominantly chosen to accommodate the illegal Israeli Settlements. It is twice as high as and three times as longer than the Berlin Wall.

Movement between Israel and the Occupied Territories is severely restricted for Palestinians. The controversial Separation Wall and the hundreds of checkpoints in the Occupied Territories hampers or prevents access to education, healthcare, employment, friends and family. I met with a leader of the anti-apartheid Wall campaign group, Stop the Wall.

For example, the 15-minute drive from Jerusalem to Bethlehem took 45 minutes due to all traffic being stopped at the checkpoint by Israeli authorities. The checkpoint is actually a massive installation with searching and detention rooms, ex-ray machines and many heavily-armed police. All road traffic besides Jewish drivers is stopped.

On the journey back from Bethlehem I went through the checkpoint on foot, as it is difficult for taxis to get through. This particular checkpoint is roughly the size of Adelaide's main bus station, with a queue of over 100 people that took around 30 minutes to get through. There are watchtowers along the sides of walls, housing soldiers with guns. They require removal of all metal items to go through the metal detector and the presentation of a valid passport or identity card; something that the Palestinians must deal with on a daily basis. The checkpoints are supposedly for 'security' reasons; however, they can be circumvented in cars if one wanted to get weapons through.

When travelling through the Jubara checkpoint, the IDF would allow the Australians through but not Rifaat, our Palestinian travel guide, who was holding a permit which was due to expire at midnight. The IDF stated that he was only allowed to enter Israel through one checkpoint - a condition that was not printed on the permit. Despite telling soldiers that we had travelled together for the past four days, he was refused access. Being the Sabbath, there was no supervisor available to speak to. We refused to leave Rifaat behind and instead took a detour through the West Bank to get back to Bethlehem. The look of anger, humiliation and embarrassment on Rifaat's face was disturbing.
On 9 July, 2004 the International Court of Justice declared in its advisory statement that:

"construction of the wall being built by Israel, the occupying Power, in the OPT, including in and around East Jerusalem, its associated regime, are contrary to international law"

"Israel is under an obligation to terminate its breaches of international law; ... to cease forthwith the works of construction of the wall ... to dismantle forthwith the structure..."

and

"Israel is under and obligation to make reparation for all damage caused by the construction of the wall"

However, construction of The Wall continues.

I visited Jubara, a small village that is now a “no man’s land”; trapped within an enclave of The Wall. This is a “seam-line” village; caught between the Israeli border on the west and The Wall on the east, and it is sometimes difficult to obtain a permit to travel to Israel, or to get past the wall. There are few, if any, opportunities for business or marriage. The only way out of the village is located at the north-eastern corner, making a one-kilometre journey to markets into six kilometres, and any movement through the checkpoint being limited by the opening times. The towns of Qalqilya, Ras Atiya and Arab Abu Farda have also been almost completely surrounded by The Wall, isolating more than 40,000 Palestinians. They live in what can only be described as open air prisons.

The local school children must travel a long distance to get to their school, and speak of their fears of Israeli soldiers who smoke hash and harass them with threats of sexual assault. I spoke to a 79 year-old man, who said his daughter has “no future” because the village is so isolated she is unlikely to marry. He had a tile business until The Wall was constructed, and he now sells tea and coffee to people stopping at the checkpoint. Jubara’s primary industry was agriculture. Though there is still a lot to sell, most of it ends up rotting on the ground because of the difficulties of transporting goods to market.

The Shaiah checkpoint has divided a village, separating families and one half of the village from the cemetery. One side is in Israel and the other in the West Bank. Some Arabs have had to forfeit their Israeli ID cards in order to spend time with their family on the other side, as it is often impossible to obtain permits to get the family through to the Israeli side.

Certain checkpoints allow only Israelis to pass through, and nearby Palestinians are forced to travel far greater distances to alternative checkpoints just to visit family who are five kilometres away. For many Palestinians such journeys are costly, having to travel by taxi or bus, as it is too far to walk. The most serious problem is the lack of access to hospitals – ambulances are often held up and subject to searches.

On my travels I met Roz, an Australian woman based in the West Bank. She is employed by the World Council of Churches, stationed for three months as an ‘accompainer’; to accompany Palestinians through checkpoints. The organisation is funded by various churches and also from personal donations, and has volunteers stationed in six towns in the West Bank. Their main concern is to limit the violence towards Palestinians with their presence, to liaise with Israeli peace activists and to raise awareness in their own countries.
Prior to the wall, the ratio of Christians to Muslims was 60:40 in Bethlehem. However, since construction of The Wall, the ratio is now 40:60. Christians are moving out of the city due to difficulties of commuting to Jerusalem and the economic hardships imposed by the war.
3. ISRAEL

3.1 POLITICS

Within Israel there is no problem with freedom of speech. I was advised that a diverse range of opinions are expressed in newspapers and in discussions, both for and against various peace initiatives. Most Israelis favour Likud, the new Kadima Party or Labor (which, like our Labor party is conservative). Within the Labor, Likud and Kadima parties there is a diversity of positions held as to the Zionist project. Not all Zionists want to expand their borders. However, all Zionists have a nationalist underpinning. Most would probably favour war if it is in Israel's best interests.

In Tel Aviv I met with Uri Avnery, former IDF Officer and member of the Knesset, who now leads the peace group Gush Shalom. Avnery pointed out one of the key barriers to peace; several generations now only know a state of conflict, making it harder to idealise peace when the normal perception is that there is a perpetual enemy across the border. This mindset is reinforced in schools, by the media and the government. It has created a widespread belief that peace is impossible, and that the Arabs do not want it. This myth is perpetuated daily. Gush Shalom is trying to show that a commitment to peace is possible, and that there are, as Avnery puts it, two narratives to every event, and that the stories from both sides must be heard and understood.

Gush Shalom is independent of any political parties or groupings, although some of its activists do belong to political parties. Their official aims are to end the Occupation, to accept the right of Palestinian people to establish an independent and sovereign State of Palestine in all the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, to reinstate the pre-1967 "Green Line" as the border between Palestine/Israel, and to open the border for the free movement of people and goods. They also wish to establish East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, to recognise the Right of Return, allowing refugees to choose between compensation and reparation and to return by quota to Israel, without undermining the foundations of Israel and to strive to create overall peace between Israel and all Arab countries in the region.

The actions of Gush Shalom are unparalleled by any other human rights or peace organisation in Israel. It uses political education campaigns as a primary strategy, focussing on issues such as freedom of Palestinian prisoners, violations of the Oslo agreement, housing demolitions, boycotting Settlements' products to name a few. Members of Gush Shalom organise large demonstrations, help rebuild houses destroyed by the Occupation, break through closure barriers, harvest olives on behalf of villagers who are prevented access to their groves by settlers and other activities to raise awareness, resist Occupation and to help promote peace in the region.

I also met with MK (Member of the Knesset) Hanna Swaid of the Hadash Party, a left-leaning party with predominantly Arab-Israeli support. Swaid discussed the possibility of a two-state solution, and whether this might result in greater hardship for the Palestinians in Israel. For example, many expelled Gaza settlers have now moved into Arab-occupied homes in Negev, Israel, displacing the Arab residents. This suggests that withdrawing the 400,000 plus Settlers from the West Bank is likely to result in more of the same. Ideally, a change of perception and direction in leadership towards a commitment to co-existence with Arabs, both within and outside of borders may be more successful.

I met with MK Yossi Balin, a "Dove Zionist" from the Labor Party. He spoke of the difficulty of the situation; that both sides are right, and the fact that in 2000, both parties were ready for peace. Many believe that Israel proved then that the Palestinians were not committed to Peace, after Yasir Arafat rejected the then Israeli Prime-Minister Ehud Barak's "generous offer" of Peace. However, the offer was not generous, requesting that Palestinians must give
up East Jerusalem and accept Israeli control over all the settlements, connecting roads and borders. The myth persists in Israel that the Palestinians refused a generous offer for peace.

Balin also spoke of the problem that Peace negotiators on both sides are often viewed by the majority as "collaborators". He believes the only way to resume the Peace process is by a unity government being formed Palestine; which recently occurred.

In the current Israeli government coalition, the pro-Peace followers are a minority, and many are extreme right-wingers, including Lieberman. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are currently sidetracked by internal divisions, which shift the focus from Peace negotiations.

I also met with Dr Azmi Bishara, a Member of Knesset with the Balad party. Balad started out in 1995 as a communist party. Today, they are committed to social justice and secularity rather than communism, and can accordingly be described as a social democratic party. Balad are an Arab party but not Muslim. Their commitment to social justice issues necessitates a focus on the plight of Arab Israelis.

Prior to joining Balad, Bishara was a student leader and then a lecturer, working in the philosophy and cultural studies departments of Bir Zeit University. The State of Israel sued Bishara and Balad when it was first formed, objecting to its formation. However, in the interests of democratic participation, the Supreme Court allowed the party to continue, on appeal (a credit to the independent judiciary).

Bishara complements the Israeli media for being pluralistic, but faults it for not being pluralistic when it comes to the issue of national identity. Media and public discourse is not only discriminatory but is hostile on the issue; insisting that Israel must be a Jewish-only state. This is profoundly different to Australian concepts of national identity, and the extremely defensive position suggests a collective insecurity.

Balad has three MKs, and Meretz (equality party) has three also, while the United Party (sectarian) has four. They are the three Arab parties with MKs, representing a total of ten out of 120 Members of Knesset. Their influence is negligible in Parliament and policy, but has an impact at a committee level – similar to the smaller parties in Australia. Balad has recently introduced quotas for women members, which is ultimately a 50/50 arrangement whereby every second member must be a woman.

Around 60 to 70% of Arabs vote for Arab parties. However, voting participation is problematic for Arabs; while they make up 20% of Israel’s population, they only represent 13% of voters. Thus, there is the question of how to get more Arabs to vote. The current Israeli ruling party is not the traditional ruling party; Kadima was set up as an ad hoc organisation in support of Sharon's disengagement policy.

They are a centre party with a distinct ideological policy platform. It is unlikely that the party will be significant after the next election.

The reason for the Lebanese war was to disarm Hezbollah; a position that the US and Saudi Arabia supported. A key factor in the Knesset going ahead with this was their relatively weak political leadership compared with the strong IDF leadership; the IDF was able to set the agenda.

Hamas demands recognition, and therefore the West must commence constructive dialogue with them, and at the same time Hamas must modify their government to become more responsible.
He criticises both sides for being too short-sighted and only looking at a three-year framework; Israel attempts to deal with the problem by building The Wall, and Palestinians have other alternatives to suicide bombing. His main fear is that Hamas will radicalise and Fatah will go into direct opposition, polarising the Palestinian people. A one-state solution is not encouraged as a political solution at present; the PLO in the past has had this idea; of a secular bi-national state.

3.2 ECONOMY

Israel's economy is over ten times larger than Palestine's economy, despite having only twice the population. Israel's industry is far more sophisticated and technologically advanced, and while it surges forward, the Occupied Territories industries continue to fail. This is due to Israel's access to foreign investments and capital, and to the withdrawal of a large proportion of foreign aid and investment to Palestine since Hamas was elected. It can also be attributed to the conditions under which Palestinians live; The Wall, checkpoints, settlements, military presence, housing confiscations and demolitions, curfews and other conditions imposed by Israel that restrict economic development in the region.

3.3 EDUCATION

There are around 3,400 schools in Israel with an average of 38 students per class. Most schools are public, and the national literacy rate stands at around 98%. Arab schools account for around one quarter of all schools, and receive only 60% of the amount of funding that goes towards Jewish schools. In addition to extra government funding, Jewish schools often also receive significant donations.

Neve Shalom, which is Hebrew for 'Oasis of Peace', started as a communal experiment by a Christian monk with a vision for Jews and Arabs living peacefully together in the one state. It has a bi-national, bi-lingual educational framework with over 200 students. Founded in 1984, it includes a primary school and high school, and now receives some support from the State.

Education at Neve Shalom is secular. However, students are taught to learn about each other's narratives and to respect each other's views. One of the difficulties is the celebration of Independence Day for Jews. To the Arabs it's the equivalent of nagba, meaning disaster or catastrophe of the 1948 war when so many were forced to leave the country. In this sense, it's analogous to Australia's celebration of Australia Day, and what it represents to Indigenous Australians. Despite such difficulties, the schools are a success and generally acknowledge all holidays.

The School for Peace is also within Neve Shalom. It was established in 1979 to provide Jewish/Arab encounter programs including workshops, seminars, courses and training in conflict-resolution. Its programs are for youth and adults from Israel and the OPT.

In the Galilee region, I met with Archbishop Elias Chacour, a Melkite Catholic Archbishop for the region. He started a school in 1983 on church-owned land within the township. Shortly thereafter, the government decided that the school was illegal due to lack of permissions regarding Planning Law. However, it commenced operations in 1985 and now has 4,000 students; 60% of which are Muslim. It is a Christian-run institution, and also has some Jewish and Druze enrolled. However, all are treated with equal respect despite sectarian differences. I also visited the Baha'i Gardens while in Haifa.
3.4 SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Apparently there was a British ruling that buildings in Jerusalem could only be built of stone or stone cladding. This gives the city an extraordinary character; virtually every building is made from stone, with a wonderful historical feel to it.

While travelling northwest of Jerusalem I visited the Neve Shalom Spiritual Centre. Fifty families live here communally, of different races and religions. It provides a place and a framework for spiritual reflection on issues at the core of the middle east conflict, and the search for its resolution.

When Christian monk Bruno Hassar established Neve Shalom in the 1980s it was like a commune, with people working together equally. Residents lived in very Spartan conditions, with no running water or electricity. However, Hassar passed away in the 1980s, since which time more people have moved in and the infrastructure has developed. They now have a constitution and a mayor, although the ownership of the land us unresolved; it was a demilitarised zone after 1948, and came under Israeli control after 1967.

There are currently around 50 families living in Neve Shalom, with a further 30 families recently approved to move in by the selection committee. A plan to expand the development to incorporate a further 90 housing lots has also recently been approved. The village has a regular rotation of international volunteers who come to provide basic support functions. In addition to the schools, Neve Shalom has a gift shop, guesthouse and a library. The library survives on donations, and is in need of more books.

The current mayor believes in a one-state solution. Palestine should stop struggling for a two-state outcome and accept occupation, but should fight for their rights to live as Israeli citizens. He is not alone in this view. The village survives mostly on donations – around 1 to 1.5 US million each year – and communal taxes, and frequently hosts thinkers/talkers to lecture on different religious, political and foreign affairs issues to increase residents' understanding and education. It also branches out to bring recognition to the cause; Pink Floyd has performed there and Steven Hawkins has spent time there for publicity.

The main reason for moving here is the desire to escape all the ideologies and conflict, and to bring up children in a nice environment. There are other communities where Jews and Arabs live side by side, but Neve Shalom seems the only place in Israel where Arabs and Jews actually live together. When I visited the village, I was struck by the symbolism of Jewish and Arab children playing together, calling out in their native languages but understanding each other.

There are peace movements within Israel besides Neve Shalom and Gush Shalom. I visited the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between People. They have been operating since the first Intifada in 1988. They encourage peaceful dialogue and advocacy, and Israelis are encouraged to join in solidarity against the Occupation. They promote boycotts of Settlement products and other non-violent resistance mechanisms, and they attract international volunteers to conduct audio reports of the situation in Italian, German, French and English. Media contact is now 80 to 85% of their work.

While in Kfar I met with Wassam, an 18-year-old violinist from the Arab-Jewish Youth Orchestra. This group of 25 young musicians meet and perform regularly. Having toured both within Israel and internationally since forming 5 years ago, they are today considered one of the most successful orchestras in the country. The group has travelled previously to Australia, and is planning another upcoming trip.
There are other peace groups and movements in which a small but determined Israeli minority participate. Frequently joined by international volunteers, they conduct peaceful demonstrations and join Palestinians in the Occupied Territories; living in refugee camps and houses marked for demolitions, and accompany children to school and women though checkpoints in the hope that their presence will raise awareness and prevent Israeli destruction and violence. For example, I met with a leader of the Masmash Watch. Founded by three Jewish women in 2001, Masmash Watch advocate human rights for Palestinians and report on the key issues. There are many incidents of volunteers being beaten, shot and killed. In addition, some Israeli soldiers refuse to serve in the West Bank or Gaza for the expressed reason that they do not wish to fight beyond the 1967 borders, and to participate in the ongoing domination and humiliation of Palestinians.

However, Israeli myths and propagandist attitudes still persist among the mainstream. In reference to an abandoned village in the Galilee, local Jews told me that “there never was a village there, just a trading post”, despite some 40,000 Arabs living there in 1948. Or that “the Arabs left of their own accord”, while in reality there were massacre and evacuation orders issued by the military. Statements such as these attest to the persistence of folklore amongst the Jewish-Israelis, which augers poorly for the prospect of any significant change in mentality. Considering some 45% of the State budget goes towards the war, economic factors should provide the impetus to strive for peace and co-existence. However, current US foreign aid of $3bn to Israel per annum helps to significantly ease what would otherwise constitute a serious financial burden.

3.5 HOUSING

Many Palestinian villages in Israel have been taken over partially or fully by Jews since 1948, and Arab development and infrastructure has been severely hampered by the settlements. For example, residents in a particular area were forced out to make way for a Jewish “artists village”. Another village was fenced off and incorporated into a National Park. No reference is made to the Arab history of the area, yet signage refers to an ancient synagogue – all Palestinian existence is intentionally ignored. There are currently 26 development plans in the Galilee, and not one refers to an Arab village. In 1965 a plan was formulated to encourage Jewish settlement to the north, both for Israeli and non-Israeli Jews.

The reasons cited for not recognising Arab villages were that they were too small. I visited Ain Hod, a small village in the northern Galilee region. The villagers forced from their homes in 1948 re-established their village on former Arab farmlands.

Archbishop Chacour spoke of how the government is creating ghettos; planning laws are preventing the expansion of Arab suburbs. He asked the rhetorical question: should we turn the other cheek? His answer is “no”; the Israeli government should be told that we are hurting and it is corrupting us in the process. Chacour is originally from Birem. Like many Galilee villages, the land remains empty. There’s no practical reason to stop Palestinians returning to their villages, despite the propaganda myth that Arab Right of Return is impossible due to the villages having already been taken by Jews.

I met with an Arab resident of Al-Basr who spoke of the confiscation of his grandmother’s house. After the house was taken, a nominal sum of funds was deposited into her bank account in exchange for the house, as per the normal practice. In this situation, once the money is withdrawn the previous occupant enters into a legally binding contract, and has no claim on the property. Many took the funds out of financial desperation. However, in this particular case, as with many others, although the woman did not withdraw the funds – and still has not some 50 years later, she cannot get her home back.
Father Chacour told me that Palestinians in Birem welcomed Jewish soldiers in 1948, and after ten days of billeting them, the villagers were told to evacuate for two weeks by the Military Commander. They were promised that they could return after this time. However, Palestinian villagers and their families have never been allowed to return, and even today many are still waiting. Birem is distinguished from other Arab villages in Israel in that there was a legal ruling to allow Palestinians the Right of Return to the village. Despite the court ruling, residents have not been permitted to return due to “security reasons”.

The Arabs that managed to remain in their homes after 1948 in other areas of Israel were subject to the “Absentee Law”, whereby any absence from a home, even for a few days and no matter the reason, would result in the tenant or homeowner losing all rights to their property. The Palestinians have strong ties to their homelands. In this Birem village there is only one church, in ruins. However, due to the strong sentimental ties to the places of worship Arabs still return to conduct weddings there.

### 3.6 INFRASTRUCTURE

Arab Israelis contribute the same tax rates as Jewish-Israelis. However, government spending on Arab infrastructure is demonstrably lower than spending on Jewish-Israelis, and in some areas it is nonexistent. This is evident in all aspects of life for the Arab Israelis. For example, the roads connecting Jewish settlements are being built as multi-lane highways, whereas those connecting Palestinian villages are left as old, single-lane roads that are in some cases unsealed. It makes life increasingly difficult for Arab-Israelis.

Lack of access to healthcare for Arabs is also an issue. Within Nazareth there are currently three hospitals. Foreign donors have contributed largely towards their facilities.

In Telamur in 1993, the largest protest since the creation of Israel took place to demand basic service provisions for Arab Israelis. Protesters also demanded for Arabs to be integrated into the country and for the recognition of villages throughout Galilee. When water finally arrived in two of the villages, the villagers themselves had to pay for the installation and piping. Israel agreed to recognise five villages, however there are still more than 40 that remain unrecognised.

### 3.7 MILITARY

All Israeli citizens (besides exemptions such as Orthodox Jews and Arabs) are required to complete two years Military service after high school. There are many 18 to 19 year-old Jewish-Israelis in uniform at the borders, checkpoints and other places. This has a huge impact on society; for every Jewish family, regardless of how they feel or think about the Palestinian issue, they are always going to be concerned about the safety of their sons and daughters. It also provides the opportunity for indoctrination of those going through national service to harden their views towards Arabs, which is comparable to the situation in South Africa under apartheid. I witnessed the effect of this at many checkpoints.

### 3.8 HUMAN RIGHTS

I met with Marwan Dwairy of Adalah, an independent human rights organisation registered in Israel. Adalah, which translates to “justice” in Arabic, is a non-profit, non-governmental, and non-partisan legal centre that was established in November 1996 to serve Arab citizens of Israel. Adalah works to protect human rights in general and the rights of the Arab minority in Israel in particular. Their main goal is to achieve equal individual and collective rights within
areas including land rights; civil and political rights; cultural, social, and economic rights; religious rights; women’s rights; and prisoners’ rights.

Adalah engages in litigation, international advocacy and consultation and also organises seminars, workshops, publications and legal internships to achieve its goals. Dwairy, Chairman of the Board of Directors from Adalah, stated that family reunification is a major concern today. For example, when a marriage takes place between an Arab Israeli and a Palestinian from the West Bank, they are not able to live together and must obtain a permit to visit. Such permits are not necessarily granted.

Obtaining a permit to move between Israel and the West Bank is a two-part process. First, a magnetic ID card must be applied for; the issue of which is contingent upon a complete absence of any criminal records, including any attention from security forces. Only if the ID card is issued can a permit be applied for. The allocation of permits is subject to discretionary powers. For example, when applying for the permit, one man was requested by Shin Beit, Israel’s central intelligence organisation to work for them. When he refused on principle, he was denied a permit. After taking his case to Adalah, a permit was eventually issued on appeal to a higher Court.

I also met with Mohammad Zeidan from the Arab Association for Human Rights (AAHR). Formed in 1988, they were the first HR program in the region. They conduct research and report-writing in liaison with the EU and UN and are primarily funded by the EU and churches. AAHR has six staff members and employs up to 21 casual and part-time staff. Zeidan spoke of some key issues since 1948. In the early 1940s more than 40% of Israel’s population was Arab; an indigenous population that has now become a minority due to the eviction and internal displacement of Palestinians. Mass evictions and the Absentee law of the 1940s and 1950s now affect between 250,000 to 420,000 Arab Israelis; at least one in four Palestinians who remain displaced in their own country.

In the period from 1948 to 1966, two legal systems were applied simultaneously; Military Law for the Palestinians and Civil Law for Jews. During this period, over 60% of Arab lands were confiscated, a widespread Jewish land-seizure. In Nazareth in 1948, 14,200 dunams of land was allocated per 13,000 Arabs (1 dunam is equal to 10 acres). In 2007, 14,000 dunams is allocated per 70,000 Arabs. Inside the State of Israel, 93% of the land is nationalised – held in a trust for Jewish people worldwide rather than just Israeli citizens. Currently, around 2.5% of Israel’s land is Arab-owned.

Legal discrimination can be broken down into four discrete categories; none of which are conceivably justifiable as “security measures”.

Legal Discrimination

In the 1990s it was proposed that a limited number of elderly Palestinians may return to their homes under the following conditions: the new sites must be a substantial distance from the old village; those returning must have owned a house in the village in 1948; families may have at most two sons and one father and houses are to be no higher than three stories. In addition, the land cannot be sold but only leased on an ongoing basis from the State, and returnees must waive all rights to the original village. This proposal allocates around 600 dunams of land (6,000 acres), which equates to about 50 square metres per family. This “Right to Return” is highly conditional and is clearly an example of legal discrimination between Arab Israelis and Jewish-Israelis, and even non-Israeli Jews, who have more land rights than Palestinians.

A significant and recent legal case taken up in Israel concerned the prohibition of a West Bank spouse from joining their Palestinian partner in Israel. The Court was split 6-5 in favour
of constitutionality. Although there’s no written constitution, there are two Basic Laws 1992 as a guide. Concerning the issue, the Knesset member blatantly spoke of the "demographic threat", yet in Court the State argued that it’s a security issue. Ultimately, the racist law was approved and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories currently have no legal right to visit their spouse in Israel. This is not an isolated issue as there are many marriages between Arab Israelis and West Bank or Gaza Strip Palestinians due to their ongoing close ties based largely on community structures prior to 1948. In contrast, a Jewish-Israeli citizen can marry a person from any other nationality, who will be automatically granted citizenship. Similarly, any Jewish person of any nationality may become an Israeli citizen.

Other key legal issues involve the IDF and its apparent legal immunity. The “Human Shields Cases” are particularly disturbing. When on search missions during the second Intifada, the IDF would first send Palestinians in to buildings, followed by sniffer dogs and finally IDF soldiers once they believed the building to be secure. There were also incidents whereby Palestinian children were tied to the front of military Jeeps in stone-throwing areas, supposedly to deter violence from Palestinians. This practice was challenged in the Court, and was ultimately ruled against; forcing the IDF to amend its military orders. However, while the IDF cannot officially adopt such policies as have been prohibited by Israeli Courts, it can and does enjoy wide discretion to carry out practically any operation that can be loosely defined as a “legitimate military operation”.

When the International Court of Justice issued the advisory opinion that construction of The Wall is illegal, Israel’s Supreme Court dismissed it on the grounds that the “facts did not justify the opinion” and that the The Wall is only a “temporary measure”.

Covert Discrimination

Besides the many examples of obvious legal discrimination, there is a large degree of covert discrimination occurring in Israel; an example of which is evident in the “compulsory” national service. All Israelis must serve in the Military, and only the Defence Minister may issue an exemption. However, all Arab and Christian Israelis are automatically granted an exemption – they do not have the option to serve in Israel’s Military. Many employment positions require successful completion of service to apply. In addition, State benefits are also contingent on successful completion of Military service; including access to housing loans, public transport and health insurance. Effectively this is a covert way of excluding certain religious groups from the basic State services that benefit Jewish-Israelis.

Institutional Discrimination

Institutional discrimination is also widely evident. For example, budgetary decisions frequently favour Jewish-Israelis; Arabs living in Israel receive less public spending per capita. Public policies on education, infrastructure, healthcare and housing, amongst others, illustrate the persistence of a two-tier system. For example, housing permits are difficult if not impossible for Arabs to obtain, and healthcare facilities for Arab Israelis are not readily available due to lack of funding or inability to access due to poor road systems. Yet the law is not discriminatory in this regard.

Social Prejudice

A culture of racism persists in Israel, even when it comes to things such as gaining entry into nightclubs. In November 2006, Haifa University conducted an opinion poll which revealed that 60% of young Jewish-Israelis believe that “population transfer” will solve the Palestinian-Israeli problem; and 65% of young people believe that Arab rights should be taken away. Besides perpetuation by the media, schools and popular discourse, these attitudes may be
attributable to assertions by the current Deputy Prime Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, that such measures are necessary and justifiable to move forward.

The mainstream media is also biased. On 15 Jan 2007, an Arab village was evicted and razed; yet it was not reported in the majority of press. In 2006 hundreds of Arab houses were demolished while the State builds settler communities. There is currently talk of ‘land swap’; an initiative to remove the Arab ‘triangle’ in the centre of the country. These attitudes and the media bias is a serious threat to the existence of indigenous communities as it serves to legitimise the current political climate. Many Israelis refer to the issue of displaced Arabs as ‘the demographic problem’.
4. CONCLUSION

Throughout the two weeks I spent in Israel and the West Bank I met with many NGO’s, political leaders, Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. My travel within the region and the people that I met with has deepened my knowledge of the conflict, in terms of both the history and the current situation. There are significant human rights violations occurring in the area, and the ongoing conflict has major implications for the Iraq war and the conflict between the Middle East and the Western World. Accordingly, it is an issue that warrants immediate attention even if prevailing attitudes in Australia seem to be that ‘there is nothing we can do’. For a start, there is something we can do because our current Australian policy is to be one of the few countries voting with Israel and the US in the UN on Palestinian human rights issues.

Three key issues that are crucial to the Peace process include the border (and consequently the status of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories), the Right of Return and East Jerusalem. A border between the West Bank and Israel needs to be drawn that is acceptable to both sides, and reparations made to those whose lives have been destroyed by The Wall. History has shown us that peace will not come from a Separation Wall. In addition, Israel needs to recognise the Right of Return of the millions of Palestinian refugees within Israel, the Occupied Territories and in neighbouring countries. Quotas could be established to allow returnees, and compensation offered to others to settle abroad.

Palestinians have strong ties to East Jerusalem and want to claim it as a capital for a future Palestinian state. However, while Israel continues to expel Palestinian East Jerusalemites and prevent them from living a decent life, a two-state solution seems impossible.

Yet I received the distinct impression that the majority of people in Palestine/Israel want peace, and history shows that no kingdom lasts forever, and injustices are ultimately overcome. In the short term, though, it seems the suffering will get worse before it gets better.

I get the impression that the majority of Zionists in Israel today want a Jewish State, a democratic State and the expansion of borders. However, only two out of three are possible. For example, the expansion of borders and adherence to democracy would not result in a Jewish state, and a Jewish state that was democratic could not exist if it incorporated the millions of Palestinians beyond 1967 borders.

Throughout my travels I was particularly struck by the incredible hospitality of the Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank. Despite the many difficulties they experience, they were welcoming and friendly. In the West Bank I sensed a large degree of humiliation and helplessness experienced by Palestinians – the feeling that there is little they can do against the strength of the IDF and the Israeli Government. However, the impression I gathered from the people I met was that there remains a strong sense of hope for peace amongst Palestinians.

My impressions of Jewish Israeli attitudes based on the people I met with identified four distinct responses to the issue. First, there is a small minority who believe that they are simply reclaiming a God-given land. Secondly, there is probably a majority of Jewish Israelis whose identification with the Jewish homeland and the perceived need to continually defend it justifies the Occupation with whatever it takes in terms of strict policing and military response. Thirdly, my impression is that there is a significant minority of Jewish Israelis who feel sympathy for the Palestinians and would wish to end the Occupation in exchange for peace. This group feels somewhat at a loss as to how to tackle the problem, especially as the three major Israeli parliamentary parties tend to ascribe to similar strategies. Finally,
there is a small minority of Jewish Israelis who feel sympathy for the Palestinians and become peace activists to protest and report on the injustices.

Ultimately, what I have learned in Palestine/Israel has helped me understand this critical world conflict and its implications for Australia. I will be so much better informed when debating the issues of terrorism and human rights.