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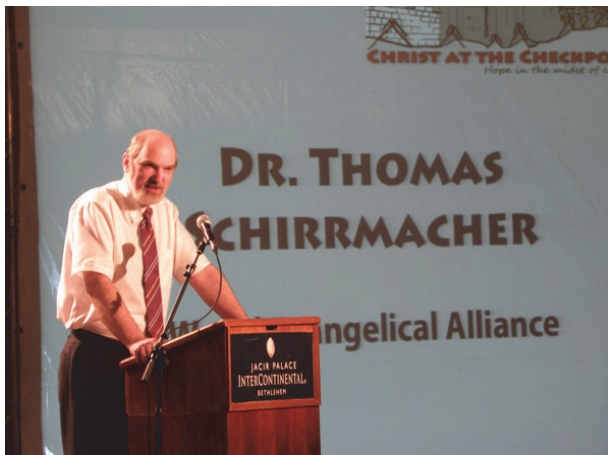
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World Evangelical Alliance supports Peace Talks in the Holy Land

[At the close of this report you are offered a reprint of an interview with Thomas Schirmmacher. In the addendum you will find the English version of the address given in Bethlehem.]

(Bonn, March 25, 2012) In his welcoming speech to the Prime Minister of the Autonomous Palestinian Territories, upon the occasion of the opening of the conference “Christ at the Checkpoint,” the Chairman of the Theological Commission

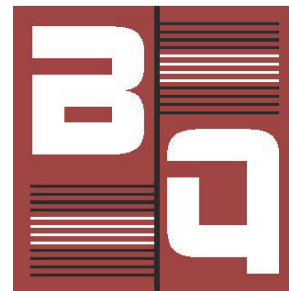


Thomas Schirmmacher during the address (Photo © IIRF)

of the World Evangelical Alliance called upon evangelicals not to deepen the trenches in the Holy Land but rather to demonstrate that evangelicals are able to accomplish reconciliation and peace across all boundaries. “If we are not able to do that among ourselves, where everything that is fundamental is what we have in common,” according to Schirmmacher, “then how can a fragmented Christianity establish peace here locally, and how can peace be managed where Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists are jointly seeking a political solution?” If Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies cannot be put into practice among evangelicals and Christians, then its beneficial impact can hardly unfurl among people who are real enemies and even armed ones.

That Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians as well as Christians of the most varied eschatological positions were coming together for discussions could temporarily even intensify the contention, according to Schirmmacher. This is often the case when positions are placed directly on the table in direct discussions. However, it is not only the sole practical way to come closer but rather to also revise age-old positions.

Within the framework of the conference there was a strategic meeting between Schirmmacher and the chairman of the association of all evangelical churches in the Autonomous Palestinian Territories. This group runs under the leadership of the



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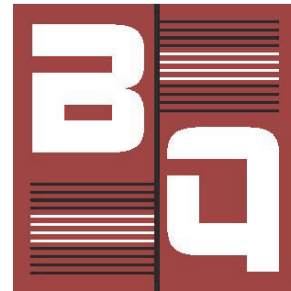
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Chairman of the Council of Local Evangelical Churches in the Holy Land, Dr. Munir Salim Kakish. He is also a pastor in Ramallah.

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has Harm Tees situated at the city wall in Jerusalem as WEA Ambassador to the Holy Land. In addition to Tees, the Director of the WEA Peace and Reconciliation Initiative, Steve Tollestrup of New Zealand, was also present at the conference. Aside from that, the Chairman of the WEA International Council, Dr. Sang-Book David Kim of Korea, gave an address.

Prior thereto, Schirmmacher, along with his wife and Islamic scholar Prof. Christine Schirmmacher and the leadership team of the Martin Bucer Seminary, had visited the Temple Mount and its mosque with the permission of Jerusalem's Islamic waqf authorities and the Mufti of Jerusalem. At the moment this permission is only very rarely given.

Against the background of an archaeological study trip involving the Martin Bucer Seminary, the married couple met with leading archaeologists, such as the Director of the Shrine of the Book, Prof. Adolf Rotman, the discoverer of the 'David inscription' and Director of the Archaeological Department of Hebrew Union College, Prof. David Ilan, and the head of the Temple Mount Sifting Project, Prof. Gabriel Barkay. Those named introduced teachers and students of the Martin Bucer Seminary to the latest finds from their diggings. Together with the head of the Sylt Bible Exhibition, Alexander Schick, who had organized the trip, highly valuable facsimiles were handed over to the Israeli Bible Society in Jerusalem for their exhibition.

Experiences in Bethlehem: An Interview with Thomas Schirmmacher

BQ: You wished the Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad God's blessing. Was that appropriate?

The New Testament repeatedly calls upon us to pray for all those in authority. Additionally, Christians bless all people, friends and enemies. By the way, Dr. Fayyad does not have an Islamist agenda and as an independent is at the moment the best solution, for which reason he surely will soon be replaced as soon as Fatah and Hamas can agree on someone. Additionally, Fayyad is basically to be thanked for the fact that in the West Bank terrorism has almost come to a standstill, that a functioning Palestinian police has been established, and that there is concentration on true state duties instead of ideology.



Thomas Schirmmacher greeting the Premier Minister Salam Fayyad (Foto © IIRF)

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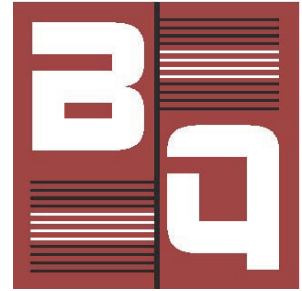
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BQ: Was the Checkpoint Conference not an anti-Israel event?

When at the beginning the various groups which had travelled to the event were greeted, there was thunderous applause when the numerous Messianic pastors from Israel were welcomed. Subsequently I spoke with quite a number of them. They were very satisfied with the course of the event and that they were allowed to fairly and openly present their view of things. Impressive - and even truly evangelical – was for me the testimony of the Director of the Bethlehem Bible College, who spoke immediately after me. He had lost his parents in the Six Day War in 1967 when his family had to leave Israel. For a long time he had a deep seated hatred for Israel and the Jews. Then he experienced a type of second conversion, when through prayer God took away his hatred in a wonderful way and showed him Jews are also children loved by God. For that reason he campaigned for reconciliation between Palestinians and Jews and with this conference also wanted to facilitate discussion between Christians of different orientations and work towards reconciliation. Is that the way someone speaks if they are only interested in damaging Israel? Is that the way someone speaks if they are looking for a cheap way to impress the Prime Minister because he happens to be present?

BQ: Reconciliation among Christians?

The tragedy is that Christianity is nowhere more split than in the Holy Land, or at least there is nowhere that is it so blatantly visible. The historical dispute about relics and the historical sites of Christianity is as bad as it ever was, and all the old branches of Christianity participate in it. The tensions between the six Christian confessions, the so-called 'status quo churches of 1853,' which maintain the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is symptomatic and symbolic, although other religions in a similar situation would not behave better. Nowhere do differing political notions lead to such basic dissociation between churches and within them. Evangelicals are no exception, even if the dispute among them has in part different and more recent reasons. Nowhere is it more difficult to just bring all evangelicals to one table.

BQ: Is there Christian persecution in the Autonomous Palestinian Territories?

One has to clearly distinguish between the areas under the control of Fatah and Hamas at this point, i.e., between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the Gaza Strip there is Christian persecution. Most Christians, in particular converts from Islam to Christianity, have moved to the West Bank. And since there are fewer Christians in the Gaza Strip anyway, their number has shrunk to a few thousand in the meantime.

In contrast, Christian churches in the West Bank live in relative freedom. The main problem here has to do with those younger Protestant churches which do not have the vested rights dating from 1923. Among them are the evangelical churches, which are not recognized in Israel and in the Autonomous Palestinian Territories even in order to conduct weddings, etc. In order to marry, you have to go to Cyprus. The foreign marriage can then be recognized. However, there is hope that there might be a change for the better in the foreseeable future.

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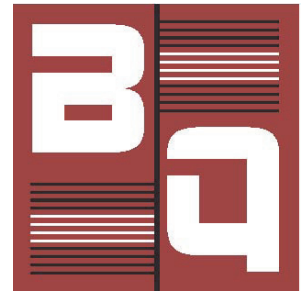
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During the address (Foto © IIRF)

The difference naturally mirrors the overall situation, which not only affects Christianity or religions in general. The West Bank is experiencing an economic upswing and there is an astonishingly quiet absence of terrorist activities. The Prime Minister is investing here in what is truly particular to nation building, i.e., in police,

administration, infrastructure, and schools. Hamas, on the other hand, is still not interested in controlling the perpetrators of violence, and social welfare and education efforts are largely only granted to their adherents.

BQ: *Is the number of Christians in Israel dropping?*

The number of Christians in the Holy Land is not dropping. The number of Jewish Christians is growing, even if it is growing very slowly, above all among immigrant Jews from countries which used to be part of the Soviet Union. The number of war refugees from Christian South Sudan and the many Christian guest workers from Asian countries such as the Philippines also account for the increase. Only the number of Arab Christians is dropping due to emigration.

BQ: *How did you experience your time at 'the wall'?*

Whoever lives behind such a wall, regardless of whether it is justified or not, and when one knows that it is only in part very high and massive – offering places to shoot through it – and that in part it is made up of a barbed wire fence with an alarm system – well anyway, whoever lives behind it, and all the more when an individual is peaceful, advocates peace, and has to endure kin liability with terrorists, such an individual can easily be radicalized. If on one side of the wall I stand there and let it be explained to me where the firing and shelling came from, I can understand the Israelis. When I am standing in Bethlehem and see that children can hardly find a playground and that one more or less is looking at concrete everywhere around, I can also understand the Palestinians.

The Palestinian suicide attack rate and the firing upon and shelling of Israeli areas from the Palestinian areas have been terrible. Against this background, retaining structures were planned as a security measure. If, however, one looks at the course it takes, it mostly encircles Palestinian residential neighborhoods – out of which shooting has occurred – and in the process it slams shut much uninhabited Palestinian residential space for Israel. As a result, Palestinians are furthermore cut off from their fields, olive groves, their places of work, and their holy sites, or they only have very difficult access to them. The wall has offered protection, and the number of

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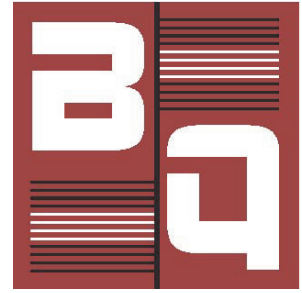
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attacks has been greatly reduced. However, over the long run it has completely different side effects.

BQ: It is thus a long way to go to a two state solution?

I see two central problems to a two state solution, for which at the moment there is no real alternative.

In the West Bank there are in the meantime around 500,000 Israeli settlers. Even with the best will for a large land exchange project, these settlements are in part so far into the Palestinian area that tens of thousands of settlers would have to be resettled. Israel can hardly manage to move 8,000 settlers out of the Gaza Strip! I cannot imagine an Israel government which would dare risk this contention and that would be re-elected after it!

At the same time and in my opinion, the Palestinians are often not interested in a two-state solution, and that not only applies to those who want to completely eliminate the State of Israel. Rather, the same goes for the more moderate. For if the Autonomous Palestinian Territories were their own state, every rocket fired from there to Israel would be a declaration of war, and under international law Israel would be within its legal bounds to conduct war against Palestine. As long as the terrorists and Islamist are not under control, there is no moderate politician who wants to take this risk.

BQ: The so-called Ultra-Orthodox reject the Jewish state.

The situation with the Ultra-Orthodox is becoming increasingly unbearable. I also saw it again this time 'live.' I saw how they ignore the Israeli state, in this case where they ignored traffic policemen after a wedding, blocked their cars, and without hesitation regulated the traffic themselves. Israel's Supreme Court has just decided that Orthodox Jews, who have been exempt from military service for 60 years, will have to perform military service. However, no one dares implement this.

BQ: You have often warned against the fundamentalism of the Ultra-Orthodox, which is gaining strength in Israel . . .

At the moment, taken together, the national religious parties in Israel have some 15% of the votes. And yet, as a small coalition partner they have gained an astonishing level of influence. By law more and more Israelis have to live in a manner understood by the minority of Orthodox Jews, although in part they even reject the existence of a the State of Israel. This is all the more astonishing since most Jews in Israel are more liberal than Reform Judaism or are only nominally associated with their religion, i.e., for reasons of ancestry. The increasing takeover by Orthodox Jewish state legislation since the middle of the 1980s has above all been driven by 'Agudat Israel' and 'Schas', which emerged from the former. The heads of the Talmudic (Jeshivot) and the Hasidic communities provide the tone.

The Sabbath rest is also increasingly being enforced outside of Orthodox neighborhoods. El-Al Airlines is not allowed to fly in or out on the Sabbath. Hotels and

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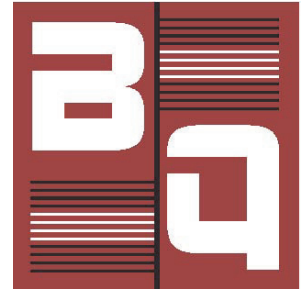
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restaurants have to pay 'kosher guards' who ensure that food is nowhere offered which contradicts the rabbinical guidelines of kosher preparation or have pork which is completely forbidden. Whoever immigrates and is allowed to become an Israeli citizen is decided upon according to strict Orthodox rules. Therefore, Reform Jews and especially Messianic Jews (Jewish Christians) are often rejected as non-Jews. Reform Jewish rabbis are not allowed to perform any religious ceremonies, although Reform Judaism represents the largest wing of the Jewish religion.

Secularized and non-Orthodox Jews are increasingly leaving Jerusalem and moving to Tel Aviv, if they are city dwellers. Especially the conflict-laden areas have a high portion of Orthodox among the population. Here lies a basic problem in Israeli society. The portion of the population which does not support the state of Israel – as a Jewish project as well as a secular democracy – be they Muslims, Arab speaking, or Orthodox, is continually increasing through a higher birth rate. However, at the same time they are also all voters.

BQ: What do you recommend to the parties in the conflict in the Holy Land?

One should be careful about speaking premature words of advice for Israel, but also for the Palestinians as well. On the one hand, because they almost never do the circumstances justice since there is such an enormous range of positions and opinions in the Holy Land among Jews as well as among Arabs and others.

On the other hand, it is hard to see things from another's perspective when one's own people and country are continually threatened by someone who wants to annihilate you. Imagine for a moment that Poland, France, and Switzerland would incessantly ruminate in front of the press about having Germany disappear from the map. From within Germany, it is somewhat easy to say that Arabs could hardly mean that they want to wage war against Israel when they speak about Israel's 'disappearing' or that Iran would rather rattle their sabres than to want to actually wage war against Israel. Jews and Israelis have historically had different experiences, namely that terrible words are followed by terrible actions. And they have found out, for instance, everywhere that Iran already has its hand in the pie. Anti-Semitism is globally still shockingly widespread and in the Islamic world around Israel, the Arab world as well as the Persian world, it is the standard opinion on the street as well as the official political position. Anti-Semitism remains racism, also when it comes from Arabs.

It is strange who allegedly feels threatened by this small country, even if they are far away from it, and who allies themselves with others against Israel. Numerous



In conversation with the Prime Minister Salam Fayyad (Photo © IIRF)

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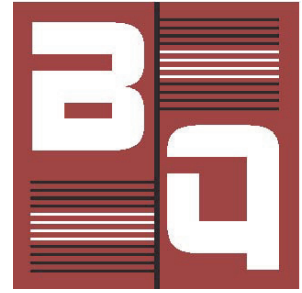
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countries in the UN become champions of human rights in the Holy Land and at home otherwise trample upon human rights. Powers campaign for refugees there, yet ignore the millions of other refugees or even those whom they themselves drive away.

It is also difficult to put oneself in the shoes of peaceful Palestinians who are incessantly drawn into kin liability for the violent acts of others. And true everyday life of a Palestinian family, their hopes and dreams, have mostly nothing at all to do with that which is published in propaganda for and against.

Whoever wants to give advice here should first of all become very familiar locally with both sides and then give advice which is helpful to people locally. Most international advice and resolutions are means used by foreign policy or even the domestic policy of other countries wanting to impress international opinion, not really wanting to achieve improvements on site. This applies to the Arab neighboring countries which have never really been interested in the fate of Palestinians as well as it does apply to the European Union or the UN. The attitude of other states and institutions almost always mirrors their traditional attitude towards Jews, Israel, Islam, Arabs, and the Palestinians. Mostly, however, there is no current assessment of the situation or efforts made to find a practicable way of understanding or to actively curb violence in the Holy Land.

BQ: Our sincere thanks for the interview!

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- [Photo 4](#): Thomas Schirmacher greeting the Premier Minister Salam Fayyad
- [Photo 5](#): In conversation with the Prime Minister Salam Fayyad

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