

The Declaration of Principles And Its Implications

A Palestinian Christian Perspective

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On September 13, 1993, the eyes of the world were focused on Washington, D . C ., where the signing of a document and a handshake between Yasser Arafat and Yitzak Rabin took place.

The sudden escalation in the negotiations between the Palestinian people and the state of Israel (this round held secretly in Norway) came as a surprise to many, Palestinians and Israelis included. The months following this Agreement were filled with much excitement, anxiety and speculation as everyone wondered what the next steps would be, and how the Agreement would be implemented. Hope, however, fell away as daily life under occupation did not change. The closure of the West Bank and Gaza persisted, violence continued and prisoners remained in jail. Despite the disappointment and mounting fears, many people remained stubbornly committed to making the Agreement work.

However, as dramatically as one date, September 13, could change things so did another, February 25. Since the day of the massacre of 29 Palestinians (this is one figure but other sources quote over 40 Palestinians killed) in the sanctuary of Al-Haram el Ibrahimi (the Mosque of Abraham) in Hebron, the situation has erupted like a volcano. Not knowing what the future holds, one remains gripped in the devastating reality of the present. Violence has escalated, and since the massacre another 86 people have been killed - 64 Palestinians and 22 Israelis. Strict curfews have been imposed on Palestinians and their daily schedules disrupted. In this issue, we have included the article on page 8 that presents a theological reflection on the massacre itself. But what about the future of the Agreement? Does this monumental event simply fade away? We hope that the answer is no, and there are several reasons for our continued hope.

For many Palestinians, the significance of September 13 is not primarily the Agreement itself, but rather the handshake that took place between Arafat and Rabin. In general, many people think that the document is a bad deal for Palestinians. Many feel that Palestinians were negotiating from a weak position which is reflected in this Agreement: it is a framework with major loopholes that offers no direct commitment for a Palestinian State, no freeze of settlements and no end to occupation. However, the act of mutual recognition that took place as part of the Agreement irreversibly binds the Palestinians and Israelis in a new set of rules, within a new reality where each group now has a stake in the security, protection and economic prosperity of the other. This can be seen as a paradigm shift from a situation of a zero sum game where one always loses when the other gains to a situation of mutual gain and loss. Both parties have to adjust and deal with these facts. If the paradigm shift is able to take hold and Israel acts on its obligation for mutual security, then the Agreement will have a chance.

If the Palestinian people feel assured of their rights, then they will be able to transform and translate the principles of the September Agreement and the recent Gaza-Jericho Agreement of Autonomy signed on May 4th, into tangible facts and actual practice. We can begin to live in the spirit of peace and harmony. We can work towards a true democracy. We hope that eventually all restrictions will be removed, all prisoners will be released and there will be an end to occupation. For the sake of our future we must retain this vision. "When there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). As Christians, our faith in justice and peace puts us in the midst of the fight as spearheads; we have to be at the forefront of transforming the quality of life.

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