Friends of Sabeel – North America

Introduction

Friends of Sabeel – North America (FOSNA) is the U.S.-based affiliate of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, a Palestinian Christian organization based in Jerusalem. FOSNA serves as the “voice for Palestinian Christians” against Israel’s policies and has been a driving force behind various Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns against Israel, including those initiated by mainline Protestant churches in the U.S.

Sabeel, FOSNA’s parent organization, was founded in 1990 by Reverend Naim Ateek, a Palestinian Christian theologian. Ateek is fiercely critical of Israeli policy and in recent years has begun privately advocating for a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict despite Sabeel’s stated support for a “just peace based on two states.”

Ateek, along with several other Palestinian theologians, coined and developed what they describe as “Palestinian liberation theology” in the late 1980s. Based on the premise that the Bible’s explicit descriptions of the land of Israel as belonging to the Jewish people must be repudiated and redefined, this theology reinterprets those descriptions in an attempt to bolster the legitimacy of the Palestinian position and disavow Zionism. Ateek has claimed that the notion that the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people is “bad theology” and that the establishment of Israel is a “relapse to the most primitive concepts of an exclusive, tribal God.”
Sabeel’s efforts to demonize Israel and Israelis have also featured charges of deicide against Jews; they have compared Palestinians to a modern-day Jesus and accused Israel of engaging in a “crucifixion” of these Palestinians. In an Easter message several years ago, Ateek explicitly said: “Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him... The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily,” a highly offensive expression given centuries of Jewish oppression on the basis of deicide charges. Ateek and his organization have also compared Israel to the Nazis, accusing Israel of committing a “Holocaust” against Palestinians.

FOSNA similarly condemns what it describes on its Web site as “distortions of the Bible” that lead to violence and racism, a thinly veiled accusation that the Jewish people’s yearning for the land of Israel – as dictated in the Bible, evidenced throughout history and ideologically formalized by the Zionist movement – is a fallacy. The organization’s mission statement, which echoes Sabeel’s agenda, calls for the right of return for Palestinian refugees, an end to American policies that “support and perpetuate the occupation,” and “active engagement” in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel.

Although Sabeel and FOSNA claim that they explicitly reject Palestinian terrorism, they also seek to lay blame for this phenomenon on Israel, noting on their Web site that the terrorism is “rooted in this oppressive situation of occupation” and “fomented” by repression.

FOSNA participates in the activities of many of the other leading anti-Israel groups in the U.S., including Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation and Jewish Voice for Peace; indeed, representatives of FOSNA often attend and speak at these organizations’ events, rallies and conferences. These groups look to FOSNA as the Christian authority on the conflict and invite FOSNA leaders to participate in their events as evidence that Palestinian opposition to Israel is broad-based and not limited to a conflict between Muslims and Jews. In November 2012, for example, Donald Wagner, the
National Program Director for FOSNA, spoke on a panel discussion at the American Muslims for Palestine’s fifth annual conference about building interfaith coalitions to oppose Israel.

While Sabeel claims to promote “a non-violent vision for addressing the conflict between Palestinians and the state of Israel,” and to support a two-state solution to the conflict, Ateek regularly describes the two-state solution as “a first step that hopefully will lead to the formation of the one state.” In July 2012, Ateek and Wagner attended a conference organized by the Birzeit Society in which they led a session titled “Palestine: One State vs. Two State Solution.” In his comments, Ateek criticized the vision of a two-state-solution and reportedly called for a “third intifada.”

FOSNA lists more than two dozen chapters around the U.S., but many of these are comprised solely of “volunteer coordinators” and are not formal chapters. There are approximately six chapters that have their own Web sites and are the primary organizers of FOSNA conferences, making it more likely that these chapters have formal membership. Sabeel also has 5-6 chapters elsewhere around the world, including in Canada, Ireland and Australia. Like other anti-Israel organizations, FOSNA has embraced social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to further promote its agenda. Although FOSNA posts regular updates on these platforms, the pages have relatively modest followings. As of April 2013, FOSNA’s Facebook page, which has its strongest following, has slightly more than one thousand fans.

**Sabeel AND FOSNA Conferences**

International Sabeel conferences held in Jerusalem and conferences organized by FOSNA in the U.S. often feature strong anti-Israel themes and speakers who accuse Israel of racism, oppression, and human rights violations, while simultaneously promoting BDS campaigns against Israel as punishment for what they allege to be Israel's apartheid-like policies. Some speakers at Sabeel confer-
enches have also described the pro-Israel lobby as excessively powerful and argue that Israeli interests control the U.S. government’s foreign policy.

In the past five years, FOSNA has held conferences in cities across the U.S. from Atlanta to Boston and Sacramento to Columbia, South Carolina. In September 2012, a number of anti-Zionist speakers advocated for a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, compared Israeli policies to Nazism and criticized interfaith dialogue with Jews. Don Wagner, FOSNA’s National Program Director, claimed: “Bethlehem is now a ghetto analogous to the Warsaw Ghetto. Surrounded by a wall, surrounded by the Israeli military and many people can’t get out.” He also stated that because Israel and the U.S. are allegedly not committed to peace, the only viable option is a one-state solution.

During a closing panel at the conference outlining different forms of “Palestine solidarity activism,” Josh Ruebner, the National Advocacy Director of the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, touted the apparent achievements of the anti-Israel movement, stating “there are so many smart, coherent, effective campaigns going on across the country to challenge U.S. policies...that are actually achieving substantial victories.” Ruebner described the recent unveiling of anti-Israel billboard campaigns in several U.S. cities and a (unsuccessful) campaign in Minnesota against Israel Bonds as specific accomplishments that can be “replicated across the country to get state governments to pull their money out of investing in Israel.”

A third speaker at the conference criticized interfaith dialogue with Jews as an “industry” that has resulted in “basically kissing the Jews’ ring or maybe some other part...” The speaker, Mark Braverman, a psychologist trained in “crisis management” who is a regular fixture at FOSNA’s conferences as on FOSNA’s Advisory Board, also claimed that Zionism is killing the soul of the Jewish people and that “some day we will be on our knees in contrition.”
Just like FOSNA conferences held domestically, Sabeel conferences outside of the U.S. also feature extreme rhetoric towards the Jewish state. At the eighth international Sabeel conference in Bethlehem in 2011, for example, Sabeel founder Naim Ateek accused Israel of practicing apartheid and called the foundation of Israel “a relapse to the most primitive concepts of an exclusive, tribal God.” Another speaker at the conference, former Palestinian Ambassador Afif Safieh, condemned the power of the “Israeli lobby,” alleging that it has “confiscated American foreign policy in the Middle East so that to us the remaining superpower looks like a sub-contractor in the Israeli strategy.”

FOSNA has been hosting conferences in the U.S. since at least April 2002 when the group held a conference in Boston featuring a keynote address by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a South African anti-apartheid activist, titled “Occupation is Oppression.” In his speech, Tutu compared Israel to apartheid South Africa and alleged that Israeli Jews are treating Palestinians similar to how Jews were treated in Nazi Germany. He said, “Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten the humiliation of wearing yellow armbands with the Star of David? Have my Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten the collective punishment? The home demolitions? Have they forgotten their own own history so soon?”

**Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Campaigns**

FOSNA has been involved in a variety of divestment campaigns against Israel, including, most prominently, the almost decade-old effort to pressure mainline Protestant churches to pass divestment against companies that profit from the Israeli occupation. Since the 2005 release of a position paper titled “A Call for Morally Responsible Investment: A Nonviolent Response to the Occupation,” FOSNA supporters have attended church conferences and applied behind-the-scenes pressure regarding divestment. Although the Presbyterian, Methodist and Episcopalian Churches have considered divestment resolutions at many of their conferences since 2004, including at conferences held in May-July of 2012, none have passed.
Sabeel continues to pressure churches to divest, claiming on its Web site that “morally responsible investment is a Christian imperative and a nonviolent method aimed at ending the illegal occupation.” Sabeel also claims to be concerned with Israel's alleged violations of international law because the group cares “about the legacy of the Holocaust and other international violations of human rights.”

In addition to divestment initiatives within the church, FOSNA has urged ordinary Americans to boycott certain products and companies because of their perceived affiliation with Israel. In December 2010 FOSNA issued a Christmas boycott call with a list of the “Top Ten Brands to Boycott.” The list was headlined with, “All I want for Christmas is an End to Apartheid” and included companies like AHAVA, Motorola, and Estee Lauder.

Although FOSNA claims to advance BDS as a way to end the Israeli occupation, many of the listed companies had no connection to the Israeli occupation, including an Israeli textile company that was included because its president is an “associate of former Israeli President Ehud Barak,” Israeli companies that produce goods that “could easily be purchased locally” and Sara Lee, which was given an award by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu because of its commitment to business with Israel. The inclusion of these companies illustrates Sabeel's commitment to delegitimize Israel and its supporters beyond the issue of the occupation.

Regional FOSNA chapters have also engaged in BDS initiatives in their areas. The Bay Area chapter of FOSNA placed advertisements calling for an end to U.S. military aid to Israel at three Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) stations in December 2010. Earlier that year, the same FOSNA chapter advocated on behalf of divestment at the University of California Berkeley when the student government was considering a divestment resolution. Although the bill was eventually vetoed, FOSNA applauded UC Berkeley's student senators for initially passing the bill and
FOSNA members joined the UC Berkeley chapter of SJP for a silent protest on campus.

Sabeel’s focus on BDS as a vital strategy to end the Israeli occupation was reinforced in December 2009 when Sabeel endorsed the Kairos Palestine Document. That document, issued by Palestinian Christians in the territories, described Israel as an apartheid state and called for “an economic and commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation.” The Kairos Palestine document led to the eventual creation of an American committee called Kairos USA that issued a similar position paper in 2012. Many of the leaders of Kairos USA are closely connected with FOSNA; the committee’s Board of Directors and staff is in fact comprised of three members of Sabeel’s staff or Advisory Board: Donald Wagner, one of the authors of Kairos USA, Mark Braverman and Tom Getman.

FOSNA on Campus

In recent years, many prominent anti-Israel organizations, including FOSNA, have focused their attention on anti-Israel initiatives on campus, a tacit recognition that while the mainstream American public is extraordinarily supportive of Israel, there is perhaps some potential to make headway in the university and college campus arena. To that end, FOSNA regularly sends speakers to college campuses and co-sponsors or endorses lectures by other anti-Israel speakers on campus as well. In March 2013, for example, Naim Ateek delivered presentations at two universities in Michigan. These talks were sponsored by academic departments at the two universities, a growing trend that provides undue legitimacy for virulent anti-Israel programming.

Members of FOSNA’s Advisory Board have also been invited to speak at a variety of anti-Israel events on campus. In November 2012, FOSNA advisory board member Mubarak Awad, the founder of a Washington, D.C.-based group called Nonviolence International, spoke at an “International Solidarity Reception” organized by the SJP chapter at Northeastern University in Boston.
Braverman, who is also on FOSNA's board, has similarly addressed audiences at universities and high schools throughout the U.S. in recent years.

Local chapters of FOSNA have even co-sponsored anti-Israel conferences on college campuses, including a BDS Conference in Denver in March 2013, which was sponsored by the Colorado chapter of FOSNA, as well as a Southern California speaking tour by Iyad Burnat, a Palestinian who leads the Bil‘in Popular Committee, which practices “nonviolent resistance” against Israel. Burnat visited several locations on and off college campuses in January 2013.

Additionally, the 2012 FOSNA conference in Albuquerque included a panel discussion that was led by members of the University of New Mexico chapter of SJP. The students explained what SJP's goals are and its successes at UNM, including building a mock “apartheid wall” on campus that compared Israel's security barrier to the U.S.-Mexico border.

**Cornerstone: A Sabeel Publication**

Sabeel has published a quarterly magazine called *Cornerstone* since 1994 that regularly includes themes attacking Israel's basic legitimacy. The most recent issue, which was published in the winter of 2012, featured an article by Naim Ateek about interfaith relations in which he claimed that Israel's founding has prevented Christians, Muslims and Jews from living together and that before the creation of the state of Israel, the three faiths “live[d] together in the same communities. They were all Palestinians.”

Ateek further pointed out that although Sabeel has done a lot of work to forge alliances with Muslims, when it comes to dialogue with Jews, “due to the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and the continued oppression of the Palestinians by the Israeli government,” Sabeel limits its talks with Jewish groups to select “Jewish partners – secular Jews, Jewish Voice for Peace, Reconstructionist Jews, and other Jews of conscience.”
Other articles in *Cornerstone* have also depicted Israel as a systematically racist country that is comparable to Nazi Germany. The spring 2012 issue, for example, included an article by Jonathan Kuttab, a co-founder and executive committee member of Sabeel, who wrote that Israel approves “laws that violate the interests and freedoms of the individual or the minorities living among them.” Kuttab blamed Jews in Israel for allegedly unfair treatment of the Arab population and stated that “the majority of Israeli Jews, acting through their duly elected representatives, are the architects of these laws.”

The same issue of *Cornerstone* featured a poem by David Glick, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace who compared Israel to Nazi Germany. The poem included the following stanza: “But what O Israel/Have you become?/The Nazis made me fearful to be a Jew/but you [Israel] have made me ashamed.” He continued, “Time to confront the darkness we have become./With the Holocaust it is Never Forget/but with Deir Yassin it is Never Mind.”

In the Spring 2009 issue of *Cornerstone*, Naim Ateek similarly compared the situation in Gaza after the 2008-9 Gaza War to the Holocaust, writing, “Many of us find it [the burning of Jewish children during the Holocaust] comparable to what the government of Israel has done to the people of Gaza today.”

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