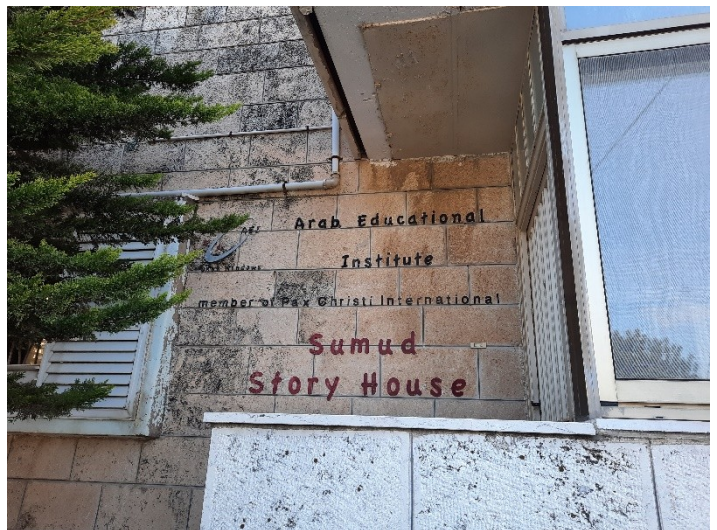


How did I experience our encounters with groups and initiatives in Israel-Palestine?



The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and the Israeli response that followed have had a huge impact on the daily lives of Israelis and Palestinians. Israeli volunteers who had previously been involved in peace initiatives were mobilized for the offensive in the Gaza Strip. Palestinians in the West Bank are suffering from increasingly frequent violent attacks by both settlers and Israeli soldiers. Added to this is the geopolitical situation in which international institutions are struggling to deliver humanitarian aid to a Gazan population suffering from poverty and hunger. As a result, Palestinians

express feelings of abandonment and sometimes helplessness in the face of situations of injustice that they experience on a daily basis under the apartheid system imposed by Israel. Under these circumstances, meeting groups involved in peace initiatives turned out to be a very special experience. These groups are not only in great need of financial resources to implement all their projects; they are in even more need of the presence of foreigners. First of all, local peacemakers were keen to express not only their feelings about the current situation and their sorrows, but also their hopes. They have a need to tell their stories and to share with people like us who live in other countries where the media are constantly telling us about the lives of the Israelis and Palestinians, but are often using other words, making other choices, and pursuing different agendas. These peacemakers then described their projects, which are based on nonviolence, “grassroots” work, and the needs of their communities. They took the opportunity to tell us about their needs and express their wish to have foreigners take part in their projects.



What conclusions have I drawn from this trip?



I have come back from this trip full of hope. There are two main reasons for this. The first is the extraordinary work being done by Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers to foster lasting peace between their two peoples. Despite the complex environment and the obstacles that are constantly being put in their path every day, they run peace education activities for everyone, both young and old. They are aware that it will take a long time, several generations, to realise the ideal that they are working towards. Their work strongly confirms my conviction

that the work done at the grassroots level is working, and that peace is possible. The second thing that gives me hope is related to the apartheid system in Israel. State propaganda, the ubiquitous militarisation of the land, the Wall that separates Israel and the Palestinian Territories are all artifices built by human beings. It may seem paradoxical, but the fact that these things have been constructed gives me hope that they can also be deconstructed. They are not an essential or inherent part of the human species. They are artificial and are reinforced by daily reinforcement of the “checkpoints of the mind” by a handful of politicians who are concerned with maintaining an order that serves their own purposes. So the field is wide open to all sorts of opportunities to build peace by continuing to work at the grassroots level on the basis of the principles of inclusion and social justice.

Did our encounters give me a new perspective on – or strengthen – an outlook that I already had?

Our encounters reinforced my view of the importance and necessity of developing local peacebuilding initiatives. The work of such initiatives is based on principles of inclusion, participation on a basis of equality, openness to dialogue, active listening, and perseverance. When their work is destroyed, they build it up again. This is a deep source of inspiration for me. Nevertheless, it is important to mention the fact that the systemic violence perpetrated by the Israeli authorities also has an impact within Palestinian society. There are many diverse examples of this: disputes related to land or agricultural resources, increased domestic violence in refugee camps where residents live in undignified conditions, and the palpable anger of Palestinians which can be seen in their aggressive behaviour on the streets. These examples support the argument that state violence permeates all levels of society and even reaches into the privacy of people’s homes. This too was a learning experience for me.

Thinking back, is there a passage of the Quran or a hadith that has come to me during a time of prayer, either in Israel-Palestine or since our tour?



It is true that the complexity of the situation in Israel and Palestine shakes one’s faith to some extent. Suffering is so ubiquitous and social justice is totally absent, so that it is impossible to emerge indifferent from these encounters. Only faith in God enables us to open our hearts. I think especially of a passage in the Quran where rich sources of meaning come together. It is taken from Sign 48 of Surah 5: **“If God had willed, He would certainly have made you all one community. But He wants to test you in what He gives you. So compete**

in good deeds. It is to God that you all return; then He will inform you of that in which you differed. » I particularly like this Sign because here, God reminds us that He alone is omniscient, and that we will be informed of our differences only at the end of our existence. Until then, we are called to journey towards the Good, whatever our experiential journeys in matters of faith, since the differences in this area are a matter of divine design. We cannot, whoever we are, claim domination in the Name of God over other members of the human community. Nor can we, as human beings, claim domination over Creation (animals, plants, minerals) which is born

of the Living One. Our differences are a test in the face of which we choose to respond in certain ways as regards how we relate not only to other people, but also to God.