

## Bethlehem Convention

BETHLEHEMITES gathered from around the world Aug. 3 to 7 in Whippany, NJ for the Bethlehem Association's annual convention. The conference was opened with welcoming remarks by Founder Dr. Edward A. Hazbun and current President David D. Handal. Events included several banquets with speakers, lectures, Bethlehem arts and crafts displays, a film series, entertainment, dancing, field trips, and a moving slide show composed by Michele Handal entitled "Palestine's Plight and How Your Donations Help," backed with three powerful poems by Bethlehemite Nathalie Handal.



*(L-r) Ambassador Afif Safieh, Prof. Waleed Hazbun, moderator Albert Hazbun, Bethlehem Mayor Victor Hanna Batarseh, and Br. Jack Curran of Bethlehem University (Staff photo M. Horton).*

"The city of Bethlehem is known for many things," said Bethlehem Mayor Victor Batarseh, "but one of the most important is the warmth of welcome that they give to travelers...I am a long way from home," he added, "but I know I am among family and friends."

In response to the Hamas elections, Batarseh pointed out, the international community is "boycotting the whole Palestinian population and driving them into poverty and extremism...I think this [Hamas] government should be given a chance to make peace...if not, it's only for the Palestinian people to topple this government, as it did before."

Mayor Batarseh has been traveling to help raise funds from sister cities, particularly those in Europe such as Cologne, Germany and the Governorate of Rome, in order to relieve the economic pressure caused by international sanctions.

Jack Curran, a De La Salle Christian brother and vice president for development at Bethlehem University, noted that "Bethlehem University is the largest employer in Bethlehem." As the administrator of Bethlehem Association-sponsored scholarships, Br. Curran reported that the association and the university "are really making a tremendous difference...Those young people are growing up and they are serving their society."

While each of the featured speakers relayed a message of hope, that hope was tempered by a worsening situation for Palestinians under Israeli occupation. "I've never been closer to God than when I am in Bethlehem," Br. Curran said. "Paradoxically," he added, "I have never been closer to evil."

"The news from Gaza and Lebanon leaves many of us powerless and speechless," Batarseh said. "To all the children of Bethlehem, I must tell you that Bethlehem needs you."

The wall, he said, is "keeping our citizens prisoners...[and] puts the life of the whole city at risk...Around 40 percent of Bethlehemites live on less than \$2 per day," he said. "Many of our visitors are turned back at Israel's airport because they mention that Bethlehem is their destination."

According to Head of the PLO Mission in Washington, Dr. Afif Safieh—introduced by Bethlehem Association moderator Albert Hazbun as the “new fresh air in Washington”—“Israel never misses an opportunity to knock Lebanon down because in a peaceful Middle East, Lebanon is an economic, financial, commercial, [and] intellectual competitor.” Comparing the Israeli assault on Lebanon with the Jewish state’s ongoing assault on Gaza, Safieh noted that there are “900,000 refugees in Lebanon because they have geography...In Gaza they are stuck because they have no place to go, and their only hope is that the shells do not land on their head...The *Nakba* was not a moment in time,” he argued, but “is still an ongoing process.

“Our battle is either lost or won in this country,” the ambassador maintained. Palestinian Christians (of which he is one) have an added responsibility, he said, because the battles for hearts and minds are in Christian countries in the West. Safieh considered it a positive sign that “the mainstream churches [in the U.S. and across Europe] have become supportive” of a boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) approach to curbing Israel’s violations of international law and human rights.

Responding to association members interested in how the newly elected Hamas government has treated Christians, Mayor Batarseh explained that Bethlehem is one of “10 cities in Palestine where, by presidential decree, the mayor should be Christian.” After more than six months as mayor, Batarseh said he hasn’t “had any problems with Hamas city council members.”

Despite the fact that Christians now are in the minority in Bethlehem, Batarseh said that Hamas has not “tried to interfere with the [Christian] character of Bethlehem.”

“If anything,” Safieh added, “we Christians are over-represented” in Palestinian institutions.

Looking ahead, Safieh went on to outline a four-point course of action for the Bethlehem Association and Palestinians in the Diaspora.

First, he said, Palestinians in the Diaspora should focus on preservation and cultivation of their identity, including their language, history, and folklore, and supporting artists like the Al Nujoom Folkloric Group, who performed at the conference.

Second, he continued, Palestinians should integrate into their Diaspora societies. This integration has been successful in the academic world, he noted, but weak in the electoral political process, media and entertainment. Citing the work of comedians Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid, co-founders of the Arab-American Comedy Festival and featured entertainers at the conference’s Friday and Saturday night performances, respectively, Safieh explained that Palestinian entertainers make “us visible and lovable.”

The ambassador’s third recommendation was to strengthen fund-raising and infrastructure development, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. He proposed building distribution capability to “market the surplus production of non-perishable goods” made in Palestine to markets abroad in order to build the self-sufficiency of the Palestinian economy.

Prof. Waleed Hazbun, assistant professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and who is studying the political economy of tourism in the Middle East, agreed with Safieh. He pointed to encouraging signs in the Palestinian tourism economy, particularly alternative tourism and new guidebooks that represent an “indigenous representation of the community.”

Safieh’s fourth recommendation was to support “confrontational nonviolence” rather than sitting on the sidelines watching ill-equipped militias fighting one of the most powerful militaries in the world. That strategy, he said, will mobilize more Palestinians in resistance and “immobilize 99 percent of the Israeli arsenal.”

For more information about the Bethlehem Association, visit <[www.bethlehemassoc.org](http://www.bethlehemassoc.org)> or call (610) 353-2010

*Matt Horton*