



RAMALLAH THROUGH THE GLASS—Drawing on Ramallah side of security fence attracts bus passengers' eyes; a district of Ramallah as seen from the top floor of the PalTel building
 {Donald H. Harrison photos}

THE JEWISH CITIZEN

SDSU group gets a VIP tour of Ramallah

By Donald H. Harrison



RAMALLAH, Palestine Authority—A group from San Diego State University was among a busload of Peres Peace Center conference delegates in Tel Aviv who accepted an invitation from the Palestine Authority to see “the other face of Palestine,” and took a bus tour of the West Bank capital city on Tuesday that culminated with a meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad and a quick sightseeing stop at the tomb of Yasser Arafat.

San Diegans aboard for a PA equivalent of any American city’s Chamber of Commerce tour were Bonnie Stewart, executive director of the SDSU-based Hansen Institute for World Peace, and her son Chris; Sandy Ehrlich, Qualcomm Executive Director of SDSU’s Entrepreneurial Management Center and his wife Cindy, and food marketing consultant Marvin Spira and his wife, Pat. Stewart, Ehrlich and Spira are part of the team helping Israeli and Palestinians to bring a blended olive oil to the international market. My wife Nancy and I also joined the tour.

The tour [followed a panel on peace](#) in Tel Aviv during which President Shimon Peres parried demands from Muhammad Shtayeh, president of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, for full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories as international leaders from other parts of the world listened in fascination. Shtayeh said such large Israeli cities on the West Bank as Ariel and Ma’ale Adunim ought to be vacated by the Israelis as part of the withdrawal.

Peres, not commenting on the fate of those two cities directly, said that Israelis do not wish to be occupiers and noted that Israel withdrew fully from the Sinai as part of its peace deal with Egypt, and reached a full peace with Jordan. He said Israel also dismantled the Jewish settlements in Gaza and withdrew completely, only to see a subsequent takeover by Hamas and the firing of Kassam rockets at Jewish communities along the border (including those of San Diego UJF's partnership region in Sha'ar Hanegv). Peres told Shtayeh progress would be enhanced if Palestinians "stop shooting at us."



CONVERSATIONS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE—Large video image shows Israel's President Shimon Peres listening intently as Croatia's Prime Minister Ivo Sander answers a question about peacemaking and reconciliation in his country, while below the screen Palestinian Muhammad Shtayeh (left) whispers to Cyprus's former president George Vassilou, with Peru's former President Alejandro Toledo at right.

Among those on the panel with the two men were Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York; Croatia's Prime Minister Ivo Sanader; Denmark's Foreign Minister Per Stig Miller; Poland's Former President Aleksander Kasniewski; Cyprus's Former President George Vassilou, Peru's Former President Alejandro Toledo; South Korea's Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Han Sung-Joo, and Moroccan Counselor to the King, Andre Azoulay. The star-studded panel was moderated by CNN International Correspondent Christiana Amanpour, who had the international participants tell of peacemaking and reconciliation efforts in their respective countries.

Vassilou, who in the years following his presidency helped negotiate Cyprus' entry into the European Union, joined the bus tour to Ramallah and served as the unofficial leader of the traveling group during visits to PalTel (Palestine Telephone), the Berzeit Pharmaceutical Co, and the prime minister's office.

Abdul Malik Al-Jaber, chief executive officer of PalTel, said that Israeli restrictions on where cell phones towers could be placed within the Palestinian Authority prompted the company to locate all its switching equipment in London. He said that if he were to make a call via the company's Jawwal mobile service to a colleague in the room, the signal would go to London and then back in an instant. This proved more a blessing than a problem, he added; the overseas switching equipment gives the company opportunities to sell other kinds of services, enhancing its profits.

Some companies, he said, see the occupation by the Israelis only as a problem, or as a reason on which to blame failures. Other people, he said, such as leaders of the Paltel group, while opposing the occupation, do their best to find innovative and entrepreneurial solutions.

Another viewpoint was expressed by Talal Nasereddin, chairman of Birzeit Pharmaceutical Company, which supplies generic medicines not only to the West Bank and Gaza, but also to Algeria. After the visitors to his gleaming-clean pharmaceutical plant donned paper hats, smocks and shoe covers and toured the operation, he said that the ever-present possibility of closures of Gaza border crossings as well as of roadblocks within the West Bank mean shipping delays. This forces the company to keep far-larger inventories on hand than competitors in Israel or other countries would ever find necessary.

Asked if his company served as a conduit for international pharmaceutical businesses wanting representation in Arab countries, Nasereddin said such a proposal was made to him by an Israeli company but that he refused. He explained that until the occupation is over, he does not wish to do business with the Israelis, notwithstanding the fact that his own residence is in East Jerusalem and many of his neighbors are Israeli Jews.



SAN DIEGANS ON TOUR—Bonnie Stewart, wearing mandatory clean room garments, walks through hallway of Birzeit Pharmaceutical Company in Ramallah. At right, Cindy and Sandy Ehrlich flank Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in the Cabinet Room of the Palestine Authority.

The meeting with Prime Minister Fayyad was held late in the afternoon in the Cabinet Room, where members of the Palestinian Authority's government hold meetings under portrait photographs of Arafat and the PA's current president, Mahmoud Abbas.

Seated at one end of the long table, at which each place has its own microphone, Fayyad told the group that after last year's coup d'etat in Gaza in which Hamas by violence established its supremacy, law and order broke down both in Gaza and the West Bank, although less so in the latter.

Fayyad was appointed as prime minister by President Abbas after Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, and Abbas, in retaliation, dismissed Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh from the top government post. An economist who previously had served as Finance Minister of the P.A., Fayyad was educated at the University of Texas at Austin, and conversed in colloquial English with the visitors.

He said that since becoming prime minister in June 2007 his priority has been “getting the country back together again.” He said he has tried to focus on practical ways of serving his constituents rather than on ideology. While he too wants Israelis to withdraw as soon as possible, he said there is plenty for the Palestinians to do in the meantime, both in terms of developing a national consensus government ahead of elections and in finding a neutral party, possibly a pan-Arab police force, to help keep internal security in both the West Bank and in Gaza if reconciliation with Hamas can be achieved.

Although Shtayeh at the Peres Peace Center conference predicted reconciliation would be reached November 9 at a meeting between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority government in Cairo, Egypt, Sayyad was far more cautious. Finding an agreement among Palestinians on how to co-exist with Israel is a “long-term” track; “it can’t be done easily,” he said. “This would require adjusting Hamas’ point of view,” he added in an understatement.

Among the strides Fayyad pointed to as evidence that life in the West Bank is stabilizing were a recent investment conference that drew numerous international participants; an open-air dinner in Nativity Square in Bethlehem that drew 1,300 people, and the inauguration of new soccer stadium with the Palestinian team battling Jordan to a 1-1 tie in that facility’s first match.

The key to ending Israel’s occupation, said Fayyad, is neither giving in to a sense of defeatism, nor becoming belligerent, but by showing the world that Palestinians can build a stable society.

“We’ve calmed things down; we’re performing much better,” he said.

He said the Palestinian Authority is investing heavily in community programs so that citizens can see the progress being made. He mentioned investments in schools, school buses, irrigation projects, and libraries.

The last stop on the tour was impromptu. A guide on the bus pointed out Arafat’s monument, at which two smartly dressed honor guard soldiers stood at attention, and had the bus slowed to enable photographs to be taken from the windows. After a few minutes of indecision, the occupants of the bus decided to inspect the monument up close, adding about 20 minutes to the schedule.



ARAFAT TOMB—An honor guard stands behind the tomb of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah

For myself and fellow Jews on the bus, it was an eery moment, so long had Arafat been considered the embodiment of the terrorist enemy. After returning to the bus, I telephoned an Israeli friend and told him, 'I am calling from in front of Arafat's tomb in Ramallah.' Without missing a beat, the friend replied, "I hope you made sure he was still there."

For security reasons, Israelis had not been permitted to join the tour. As for myself and other non-Israeli Jews who did take the tour, we all felt welcome wherever we went as part of the Peres Peace Center delegation.

The Jewish and non-Jewish members of the SDSU delegation agreed that the tour had been a worthwhile experience. Stewart described as a "fantastic opportunity" having the various meetings and seeing the border crossing and the controversial security fence (or "barrier" as the Palestinians call it) between Ramallah and Israel-controlled territory. "They wanted to change the outside image of the West Bank to show that there were a lot of productive enterprises ongoing, and that they are working very hard to create a lot of employment opportunities."

Said Spira: "I thought it was an eye-opener, interesting, and a different point of view than we had been exposed to. The point of view that we had through the Peres Center was the Israeli point of view all the way through; we now got the Palestinian point of view. It was interesting to hear the other side."

He added that he was impressed both by the pharmaceutical company and the telephone company, explaining "I didn't think that they would be that sophisticated. On the basis of

entrepreneurial development, they were much more advanced than I thought any business would be in Ramallah.”

However, he added, “we always have to keep in mind that we are being shown the exemplary products of this particular area. We are not going to be shown the general part of the city—the parts where you see the 25 percent unemployment. We are being shown two very, very successful examples of what is happening in Palestine. They were examples shown to us to impress us, and they did.”

Ehrlich, whose academic specialty is entrepreneurship, said he was “extremely impressed with the ingenuity of the Palestinian entrepreneurs. One of the difficulties of any business is logistics and logistics in the Middle East is incredibly difficult,” he said. PalTel’s ability to turn the problem of the switching equipment into an opportunity “really exemplified their resourcefulness in growing a business in extremely difficult circumstances.”

Additionally, said Ehrlich, “I think both companies have solid management teams, and I think the CEO of each company was articulate and that they understand their business models well, and I think both understand how to deal with the realities of growing a business in that environment.”

Ehrlich called Birzeit Pharmaceutical Company a “state of the art, modern facility and the fact that visitors were required to put on outfits exemplified a clean-room environment. I have been in some plants where they were lax for some visitors and will allow you to walk through a plant. We did not even enter any of the manufacturing facilities (observing them instead through a window) and yet we were required to put on all of those outfits. “

Cindy Ehrlich said that the Ramallah tour confirmed conversations San Diegans had previously with Palestinian agricultural officials about the economic difficulties caused by the multiplicity of Israeli-staffed roadblocks throughout the West Bank. “You see the obstacles that they are forced to live with and they are trying to prosper regardless, and for me it was very eye opening.”

She added that wherever the tour went, they found the Palestinians to be “very welcoming people, very respectful of us, and very interested in making sure that we had a positive experience. “

“I was delighted to have this experience,” commented Pat Spira. “I was really delighted to see the two companies, especially the pharmaceutical plant—how clean it was. I would have loved to have found out more about labor conditions; I was interested to learn about the hours they worked at the pharmaceutical company (a single shift, 41 hours a week) and whether women could advance.

“I talked to one of the women at PalTel and she was in charge of the giving program—she was in charge of giving, the social responsibility; it was interesting that both of those companies had social responsibility programs, where they were giving money, just as we do in the United States,” she added.

Harrison may be contacted at editor@sandiegojewishworld.com