# Mar Elias, Arab Christians of Israel, and the Sign of the White Dove

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The intent of this paper is to relate the formation of a tertiary institution as part of Mar Elias Educational Institutions and to identify the spheres of influence and relevant factors that may lead to its success or demise. It considers the relevance of its founding president, Abuna Elias Chacour, whose installation as Archbishop of the Galilee in early 2006 has brought a sense of cautious optimism. It identifies some arguments for and against the Mar Elias project's possible identity as a Christian-oriented and peace-building institution and the goal of increasing educational standards and opportunities for the community-at-large. It also maps the current climate of tertiary education in Israel with emphasis placed on those institutions serving the Arab population and considers possible scenarios for a future Mar Elias university.

[Key words: Mar Elias, Israel, Chacour, Arabs, Jews]

## INTRODUCTION

Situated between Haifa and Nazareth, the Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI) are located in the heart of a large Arab[14] community in northern Israel. The geographic position of MEEI is significant because Christianity originated in this region. Arabs represent the majority of those who reside there, even though there are pockets of Jewish settlements strewn throughout the area that have been increasing since the 1990s. The Arab population is one people of various religious, ethnic and cultural heritage (i.e. Muslim, Christian, Palestinian, Bedouin), but is often collectively persecuted and marginalised as a consequence of their cultural and religious beliefs and contentious issues relative to land ownership.

MEEI consists of a cluster of buildings representing a school campus for primary, secondary, and post-secondary students. Both MEEI and the Arab community-at-large have experienced much conflict and hardship from within Israel and abroad. Beyond instability and conflicting interests stemming from a torn nation-state, MEEI has also suffered in its quest to establish a recognised academic institution with degree-granting authority.

This paper makes no attempt to analyse the complex rift between the peoples identified as Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel. Such contestations have been well documented on both sides.

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[14] In this paper the term *Arab* is used to indicate only the Arab Palestinian citizens who constitute approximately 20% of the population of Israel. They are also often referred to as Arab-Israelis, Israeli-Arabs or Palestinian-Israelis.

Instead, it attempts to highlight salient aspects pertaining to the socio-educational gaps between the two, which may help set apart disparities in educational provision. This is necessary in order to conceptualise and analyse aspects of Israel's educational system and provide a more detailed picture of education for Israeli Arabs in northern Israel.

Methodologically, this paper utilises a combination of empirical research, comparative and national system case studies, and theoretical explorations to contextualise the Arab social-cultural context and circumstance. In the process, it attempts to argue the position for a more peaceful resolve between Arabs and Jews by establishing a formal tertiary institution geographically situated in northern Israel, which specifically caters for the region's marginalised peoples. In addition, it compares and contrasts a limited range of Israeli higher education institutions in an effort to distinguish MEEI from others in terms of curriculum, teaching, learning, ideas and practices. Finally, it critically examines its formation with that of other newly formed universities in the developing world that serve to support a nation or culture.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The land today known as Israel/Palestine has been at a crossroads for trade and pilgrimage for over 5000 years. It has been the subject of invasion, colonisation and a continuum of competing religious and political claims over the millennia. There have also been periods of calm when its inhabitants (the peoples of Islam, Judaism and Christianity) have lived together harmoniously. In more recent times, the rise of religious radical groups, retaliatory violence, and issues involving identity have brought instability, uncertainty, and turmoil to the region.

The differing narratives of Jewish and Arab histories in Israel have developed largely through isolation or ignorance. The Jewish national perspective has been built upon a strong ideological and religious framework in relation to their belief that the 'promised land' in the region of Canaan was given to their ancestors by the God of Abraham. The Arab perspective relies on the notion of belonging to the land and ancestral heritage dating back to the Canaanites, Edomites, and Philistines (Ichilov, 2005). Since the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, seven major wars and ongoing conflict have deepened the divisions between peoples and entrenched systemic inequities for the minorities. Attempting to bring stability and peace has resulted in a range of major international and multilateral interventions of the United Nations, numerous resolutions put to the Security Council, direct involvement of the United States, and instruments such as the Oslo and Geneva Accords. The success of these and other international interventions has been questionable. Contentious issues regarding land, security, identities and special segregation seem unresolvable in the quest for a mutually agreeable end to the conflict. Militarisation and the might of weaponry have not brought stability or security to the region. Retaliatory violence continues to exacerbate conflicts and escalate destruction and despair. All Israeli citizens live in a constant state of tension and insecurity.

From an outsider's perspective, Israel is widely perceived as both a tiny Jewish minority and yet an integral part of the Arab Middle Eastern region. From an insider's perspective, however, the State of Israel — in terms of cultural, societal and political norms — perceives itself as more aligned with Mediterranean Europe. Politically speaking, it is described as the only democracy in the Middle East and its economic and educational systems have been developed in line with Western ethos and practice. These support a normative approach to majority rule. Although the Jewish population constitutes a majority, there is a significant Arab population residing in Israel (as opposed to West Bank and Gaza). Despite this, Israel …"is the only country in the Middle East where Arabs are a minority, constituting about 13 per cent (in 1948)" (Ichilov, 2005, pp.46–47).

## THE CURRENT SCENE

At present, Arabs in Israel, both Muslims and Christians, constitute approximately 20 per cent of Israel's diverse population as illustrated in Figure 1. The emphasis placed on minority/majority ratio deepens the degree of separation among people in an ethnic, ideological and cultural sense. The asymmetry of power relationships in all sectors has exacerbated divisions. The voices of minorities, for a range of reasons, are rarely heard and usually unrecognised in public discourse. In turn, this reinforces notions of victim-hood and reliance on welfare within minority groups, and further promotes oppression and discrimination throughout all areas of human endeavour: economic, educational, health, political.

**Figure 1: Population of Israel by group, 2004**
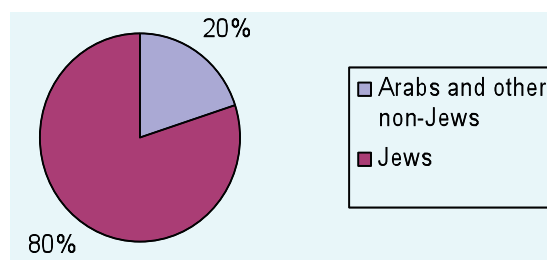


Note: In 2004, the Israeli–Arab population totalled 1.3m and the Israeli–Jewish population totalled 5.5m. The 'others' refer to non-Arab Christians and those not classified by religion.
Source: Arab Citizens of Israel (Retrieved 20 August 2006). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_citizens_of_Israel

Lack of access to quality education and employment opportunities — especially for women — under-representation in community development, high levels of child poverty, racial profiling and the psychological effects of suspicion, fear and negative stereotyping within the Arab population are well documented (Kamm, 2003), and supported by census figures (Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel: Online). The future for Arab citizens in Israel also appears highly uncertain. Discrimination in employment has forced many Arabs into lower paying, physical work, and it is not unusual to find Arab graduates highly overqualified for their jobs (Kamm, 2003 p.51 and Al Haj[15]). Security clearance for Arabs is an issue for the State of Israel that places immense emphasis on the need for constant vigilance against threats to the safety and security of its majority. Military service is often required as a prerequisite for employment of all residents and since this is largely limited to the Jewish, Druze and Bedouin populations, Israeli Arabs are often disadvantaged.

Co-existence between Arabs and Jews in Israel is perceived as one of the requisites for national stability and eventual reconciliation; however, two separate communities have emerged as each struggles to maintain the integrity of its own heritage. There is also the 'deliberate segmentation of the Arab sector' supported by separate school systems (Kamm, 2003, p.3). "Education is the central vehicle for nation building in Israel, [and] … minorities are integrated to the degree that their integration does not threaten the state's basic Jewish character" (Kalekin-Fishman and Eden, 2003, p.33). Very limited budget allocations for education have generally resulted in lower levels of achievement in the Arab population, which in turn impacts on future employment opportunities as described above. A recent government directive encourages affirmative action in order to facilitate the employment of educated Arabs, but this does not address the root causes of the issue (Halpern, 2006).

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[15] Professor Majid El Haj, Sociologist, Haifa University: From an unpublished address to the *Al Qandil* conference on Arab Higher Education, Nazareth, May 2006.

## Bridging the Divide

Addressing the Arab Christian population, a trend of increasing emigration and brain drain has become a source of great anxiety (CNEWA 2002). This group tends to seek higher education degrees and job opportunities in specialised fields in Western countries. Israeli government statistics show that the number of Christians has declined significantly from 29 per cent in 1949 to approximately 2.1 per cent in December 2005 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

The decline in overall numbers of Arab Christians and Druze is illustrated in Figure 2 and suggests a possible Diaspora, natural decline in fertility, or both.

**Figure 2: Comparison of Israeli Arab Population by Religion (1950 and 2003)**
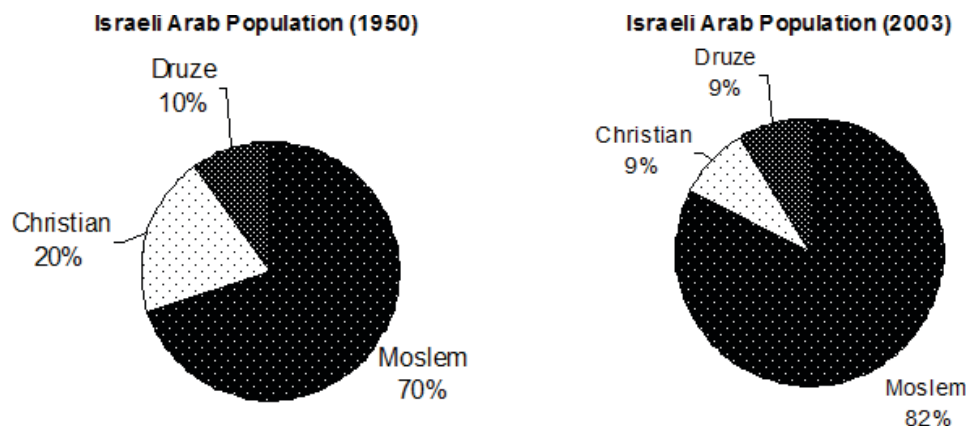


Note: In 1950, Israel had an Arab population totalling .167 million. In 2003, the Arab population totalled 1.302 million people. Differences in population size between 1950 and 2003 are not to scale. Source: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics. *The Arab Population of Israel 2003*. (Retrieved 21 August 2006). http://www.cbs.gov.il/statistical/arab_pop03e.pdf

Significantly, however, it is Arab Christians who religiously, psychologically and educationally straddle the so-called East/West divide and who increasingly are being recognised as a force of moderation in the context of Muslim and Jewish groups in Israel.

As an educational institution founded upon Christian values and which includes a predominantly Muslim student body (high school 65%; college/university 80%) Mar Elias Educational Institutions has been modelled as a strategy to increase educational access and equity and to stem emigration by retaining young people in the Galilee region.

## Mar Elias as a Tool for Peace

In 1965, a newly ordained Arab Palestinian Israeli Melkite Catholic priest named Abuna Elias Chacour[16] set in motion a bold new direction for the Arabs of northern Israel. Chacour had been sent on a temporary placement to the — then — isolated and impoverished village of Ibillin (near Nazareth in central Galilee, Israel). At that time, Ibillin's population of 3,500 Muslims and Christians included some 50 per cent who were under the age of 14 years. It was common for entire families, even three- and four-year-olds, to work in the fields during the harvest season. Chacour's first practical initiative was to persuade three Catholic nuns from Nazareth to open a small kindergarten in the parish house located in Ibillin. Chacour believed that if his people were to improve their life situation in the midst of ongoing conflict within the general culture,

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[16] Chacour has received numerous awards for peace-building work, among them three Nobel Peace Prize nominations, the Niwano Peace Prize (Buddhist equivalent to Nobel Prize), America's First Freedom Award, Israel Lion's Man of the Year, and several honorary doctorates.

education had to become a priority. The completion of the local high school in 1982 marked the official beginning of Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI). Its institutions currently include kindergarten to tertiary levels. Figure 3 notes the distribution of students by school level.

**Figure 3:  Student Distributions According to School Levels at Mar Elias**
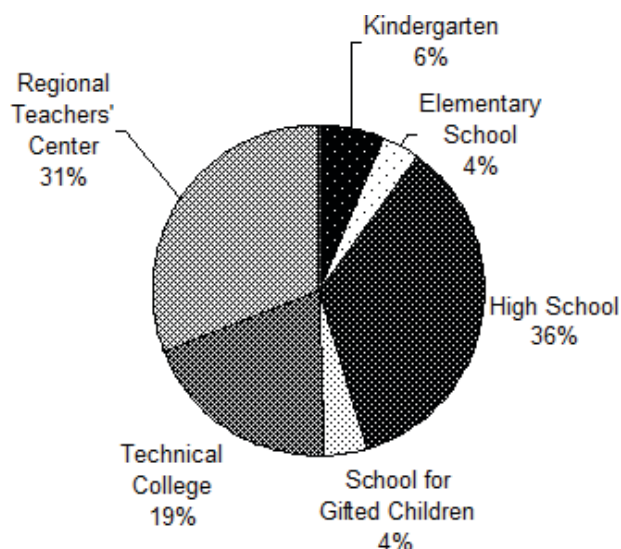


NOTE: The Regional Teachers' Center is included as part of Mar Elias, since it offers a necessary training and professional development facility for teachers in the region. The 220 students of the Mar Elias Branch Campus of the University of Indianapolis are not counted since it is as yet not a fully recognised Israeli academic institution.

The Mar Elias complex today has itself grown into a small village of over 3,850 pupils and students who, if they wish, can continue their studies at all the various school levels. Over 290 teachers (Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Druze), administrative and caretaker staff are employed. Many of the Arab teachers are overqualified. Over 60 PhD recipients are employed as teachers, for example, and several of these teach only in the high school.[17] Muslim, Christian and Druze students receive an education uncompromisingly focused on inclusion, openness, and mutual respect of the other.

Remarkably, this extensive complex was begun with no financial resources on a small piece of non-arable land owned by the Melkite Church. As an Arab institution, it suffered much opposition from local and regional authorities and, consequently, received minimal government funding. The local villagers, together with the high school students and their teachers, volunteered their time to work on the physical building of the school after dismissal of classes. Local contractors provided materials and labour at very much reduced rates. From the outset, Chacour insisted that the school be open to all students of any faith affiliation or ethnicity, since the building of a harmonious society would depend on instilling respect, acceptance, and mutual trust in the hearts and minds of all citizens of Israel. At present, it is considered a multicultural and multifaith complex with 10 per cent Jewish, 35 per cent Muslim and 54 per cent Christian and 1 per cent Druze faculty members.[18]

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[17] Statistics obtained from MEEI Administration Office, February 2006
[18] Statistics obtained from MEEI Administration Office, February 2006

Unlike other schools in Israel, the educational philosophy of Mar Elias has promoted a system that accepts Jewish standards as laid down by the Ministry of Education and at the same time ensures that Arabic culture, values and heritage are an integral part of the daily curricula. Students are expected to be at home on a campus where they are encouraged to 'be the best Muslim or Christian or Jew that they can be'. Formal participation in Arab/Jewish dialogue and personal development programs is important and fundamental in breaking down a segregated system of public education.

## Higher Education in Israel and Mar Elias

Unfortunately, at this writing, there is no Arab public university in Israel. The Central Bureau of Statistics (2005) records the median age of the Arab population as 19.7 years compared to 30.3 years for the Jewish population. Yet Arab students comprise only 8.1 per cent of all university students in Israel. In 2003, 51 per cent of Arab high school graduates matriculated but only 31 per cent of these met university entrance requirements. Among Jewish high school graduates, 57 per cent matriculated and 48 per cent were accepted into university programs. According to Mar Elias' planning estimates,[19] each year over 5,000 Israeli Arabs enrol in offshore academic degree programs in Jordan, Europe and North America. Although all the reasons for these circumstances may be unknown, what is clear is that there is a significant loss to the knowledge base and socio-economic development of Israel.

Apart from their exclusion from educational opportunities, there are ranges of social and cultural factors that disadvantage Arab students in their quest for higher education at Israeli universities. The following list notes some of the most important factors:

- Arabs represent only 1 per cent of university lecturers nationwide (Levy-Barzilai, 2001).

- Military service is not a legal requirement for Arabs but evidence of successful completion of army service is required for many social and economic benefits. A recent report by Traubmann and Joffe-Walt (2006) details a high court ruling disqualifying military service as a criterion for granting benefits, a common practice among institutions of higher learning.

- A large proportion of Arab society, especially Muslims, hold very conservative views and education is often denied young women based on the fear of 'corruption' in a western style institution (MEEI, 2006).

- The Israeli university entrance requirement includes a compulsory psychometric test that is culturally biased in favour of Jewish students. Knowledge related to Judaic culture and Judaism is not well known and understood by Arab students. Interestingly, when the test was suspended in an effort to benefit poorer Jews from Middle Eastern countries, there was a corresponding sixfold increase in Arabs studying medicine at Tel Aviv University (McGreal, 2003).

- Academic studies do not reflect the personal collective experience of Palestinians and Arab students are not encouraged to participate in gathering such information.

- Learning style is problematic since Israeli–Arab schools tend to focus on rote learning. Creativity is stifled and this limits students' potential for research. Abu-Bakr (2006)[20] cites a range of cultural and psychological difficulties for Arab students. She notes that they experience cultural alienation and there are other learning and language-related problems.

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[19] From a private interview with Dr Raed Mualem, Head of the Mar Elias university project, February 2006
[20] Prof. K. Abu-Bakr. Unpublished address: *Al Qindel* Conference on Arab Higher Education, Nazareth 2006

According to the *World List of Universities*, there are currently seven universities and nine other higher education institutions in Israel. In addition, other less-known institutions are seeking accreditation by the Israeli Council of Higher Education and authorisation to confer degrees. Figure 4 lists the current higher education institutions authorised to award academic degrees.

**Figure 4: List of Universities and Other Institutions of Higher Education in Israel (2006)**

| |
|---|
| Bar-Ilan University |
| Bezalel Academy of Art and Design |
| Ha'Universita Ha'Ivrit Bi'Yerushalayim |
| Ha'Universita Ha'Petuha |
| Hamaslool Ha'akademi shel Hamichlala Leminhal |
| Hamikhlalah Ha'academit Lehandassah Sami Shamoon |
| Machon Weizmann Lemada |
| Netanya Academic College |
| Technion-Machon Technologi Le' Israel |
| The Academic College of Tel-Aviv, Yaffo |
| The Interdisciplinary Center |
| The Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance |
| The Zinman College of Physical Education and Sport Sciences at the Wingate Institute |
| Universitat Ben Gurion Ba-Negev |
| Universitat Haifa |
| Universitat Tel Aviv |

Source: International Association of Universities World Higher Education Database (accessed 12 August 2006) http://www.unesco.org/iau/onlinedatabases/list.html

Note: The following institutions have received a permit to open and maintain an institution, but are not accredited as institutions of higher education nor are they authorised to award academic degrees to graduates: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies; Ashkelon Academic College; Jordan Valley College; Machon Lander and The College of Sakhnin for Teacher Education; and Mar Elias university project.

The Mar Elias university project has been added to the above list, as the Israeli Council for Higher Education has granted a permit to exist as a branch campus, contingent on inter-institutional partnership with the University of Indianapolis (USA). Intense scrutiny of all aspects of curricula, infrastructure, staffing and teaching of this fledgling university has stretched scarce resources and finances to their limits. Added to this, demands for compliance and denial of government funding (yet all students are Israeli citizens) has resulted in very stressful conditions for staff and students. The compliance requirements can go well beyond the boundaries of reason: a reference book supplied in the sixth versus the fourth edition almost led to the institution's closure at the end of its first semester.

Walbiner[21] has written that Arab universities throughout the Middle East are often considered teaching-only institutions lacking research facilities, a circumstance, if true, that inhibits the generation of new and culturally appropriate knowledge and technology. He also observed that only a few of the 22 Arab countries are active in higher education, including Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. He concluded that any success of Arabs within higher education in Israel might lead to further successes both within Israel and in the global context. If the community in Ibillin were to succeed, for example, it would serve as a challenge to the rest of the Arab world.

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[21] Dr Carsten Michael Walbiner is an Arabic Studies scholar working at the Catholic Academic Exchange Service (KAAD) in Germany. His unpublished speech was given to the Mar Elias Campus staff in June 2005.

Teaching and research are heavily regulated, particularly since Israel is strongly dependent on overseas funding sources. Teaching, curricula development, and the authorisation to confer university degrees are assessed and monitored by the Israeli Council for Higher Education. Israeli institutions recently experienced unwelcome international attention with a boycott related to admissions practices that favour enrolling Jews over Arabs. At the same time, most international university partnerships have been shut down to re-establish control over the development of Israeli higher education (Joffe-Walt, 2006). The introduction of a revised system of Israeli Academic Institutions, which will be implemented nationwide by 2007, suggests that Israel may be developing a binary system of higher education based on the teaching and research capabilities of its current academic institutions. Research in Israel, however, appears to be skewed towards national agendas. Mar Elias appears to hope that as it endeavours to implement some of the suggestions of the Israeli government that call for education for democracy, dialogue and cultural exchange, a more inclusive agenda will emerge.

Nascent Mar Elias University is also being prepared and primed for participation in an innovative multicultural model for higher education. Seven well-established Israeli-Jewish academic colleges of higher education in the Galilee region are expected to form a consortium to constitute a new University of the Galilee, which might also include Mar Elias. There are already eight well-established universities in major centres throughout Israel, but it has been suggested that a well-chosen consortium of established colleges would bring together the expertise and curricula to serve the specific developmental needs of the Galilee region.

If supported in its development, the Mar Elias university project could be well placed to provide the currently missing perspectives of Arabic culture and Arabic studies that may make a strong contribution towards cross-cultural learning and understanding in the Middle Eastern region. Mar Elias leadership has ascertained that there are approximately 5,000 to 7,000 Arab–Israeli students currently enrolled in universities in other Arab countries, in Europe and the USA.[22] This indicates that there is a significant pool of students for a regional university and the new Mar Elias university might be in a favourable position to attract a large number of Israeli Arabs.

The Mar Elias Campus Director of Research, Dr Fauzi Silbaq has asserted that, "There is a chance for integration in this country for a strong future … We have to be united but not assimilated and uniform. … We believe that diversity is a chance and opportunity of richness, not a source of problems. It is a source of peace — a complementary element to the other."[23]

## Mar Elias and Peace Building

Among the many approaches to peace building in divided and distrustful societies like that of Israel, the process of rebuilding relationships is often seen as the key to creating the conditions for enduring peace. The question constantly before Mar Elias Institutions' students and staff is, "How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?" (Lederach, 2005, p.5). A response to the existential needs of a small local community that has now stretched over three generations of children, renewing trust between Arab and Jew, Druze and Christian, Muslim and Christian, holds some possible ways forward. Healthy relationships are fundamental to peaceful existence together and the deep generational change needed to sustain it.

Alongside the political and economic endeavours that seek to right the structural inequities that conflict has perpetuated and created, the process of relationship building must be given

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[22] Statistics sourced from unpublished address by Dr Raed Mualem, Mar Elias campus, February 2006
[23] From an unpublished address to Mar Elias faculty and board members, January 2006

precedence, particularly in societies divided along religious or ethnic fault lines. Many relational approaches to peace building are aimed at reducing prejudice through encouraging contact around superordinate goals. To be effective, prejudice-reduction education programs must not only increase contact between the opposing parties but also encourage tolerance and reduce discrimination and hostility with a view to developing empathy. Hughes and Donnelly (2006, p.81) discuss the primary conditions for effective inter-group contact:

- a parity of status for all parties involved in the process;

- ongoing personal interactions between individuals (the contact cannot be short-term); working towards a common goal; and,

- institutional support where there is official social sanction for contact between the groups.

Pettigrew (1998) suggests that, supplementary to these conditions, it is the way in which the contact is mediated that can influence attitudinal change. If the contact process allows the groups to re-assess their prejudice about each other and, in the process, reflect upon how and why stereotyping occurs, then attitudinal change can take place. Similarly, if emotional ties are built through the contact process leading to an increase in inter-group trust and confidence, then anxieties can be reduced and empathy built. The results of a study by Hughes and Donnelly (2006) undertaken in integrated schools in Northern Ireland and Israel, demonstrate the importance of learning about each other's language, culture, history and beliefs as a means of undoing previously held stereotypes. Their research also suggests that having a cohesive staff, with strong interdependent relationships that is committed to the contact process and has a clear understanding of how contact can mediate trust and relationship building, is vital.

Relationships and openness to the other are integral to the ethos of Mar Elias institutions, which are purportedly founded with Christian values of responsibility for and acceptance of each other. Mar Elias staff have earned a reputation for working hand-in-hand with Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze compatriots in social and religious domains as well as in education. From the outset, the Mar Elias High School has actively participated in and hosted a range of Arab/Jewish initiatives such as inter-school visits for dialogue and workshops. Jewish teachers comprise about 10 per cent of high school staff.[24] The number of Muslim, Christian and Druze students across all of the Mar Elias institutions parallels the national population distribution except there are no Jewish students.

Besides the issues that may be attributed elsewhere, there is the fact that very few Jewish people have a working knowledge of the Arabic language. There are compelling reasons for students to be educated in both languages of their region and this has begun to be officially recognised with the establishment of bilingual schools at the elementary level. Mariam Bawardi Elementary School[25] has been one of the first Arab schools to pilot a program of exchange where Jewish and Arab students participate in a weekly program of formal and informal education including science, English and cultural studies delivered in both Arabic and Hebrew by native speakers.

Despite some success in building trust and friendly relationships in the school environment, there is little evidence yet to suggest that the pattern is being replicated in the broader community. Yet, even amid ongoing conflict, Chacour and his people insist that, in this pluralistic society, diversity be embraced as social and spiritual enrichment rather than a threat.

Questions must be raised about the ways in which contact and prejudice-reduction strategies at a micro level can have an enduring impact, if the socio-political and economic structural inequities

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[24] Statistics obtained from MEEI Administration Office, February 2006
[25] MEEI's elementary school named for a local saint

at a macro level are not addressed. Anderson *et al*'s (2003) peace-building matrix (Table 1) recognises that peace programs/projects are most effective when they reach a range of people and particularly those key players in the conflict. Programs that effect change at an individual/personal level *and* at the socio-political level will have a greater impact than programs that operate in one arena alone.

The efforts of the MEEI programs and activities are strongly focused within the Arab community in Galilee and remain largely peripheral to Israeli society at large, but do have some increasing influence through relationships established with Members of the Knesset, church, and community leaders.

**Table 1: The RPP Matrix**

|  | **More People** | **Key People** |
|---|---|---|
| **Individual/ personal level** | MEEI's starting point and major effectiveness: Students, faculty, visitors (local & international), community – changing hearts and minds | Mar Elias President, principals, directors, teachers, student leaders |
| **Socio-political level** | Some influence at level of local & governmental officers, ministers – advocacy | Mar Elias President , local and national leaders |

Source: CDA (2004 p.12)

Describing the practice of achieving peace provides an indication of Mar Elias' spheres of influence. As an educational facility, it is focused mainly in the individual/personal quadrant with the involvement of many students and local community. It is rather less influential and less involved in the lower quadrant that might be labelled 'peace writ large' in spite of the fact that, as Stern and Khoury (2005) report, Arab Christians number one out of eleven among the membership of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) and the Director General of the Ministry of the Interior is also Christian. Mar Elias would possibly increase its effectiveness by creating linkages between the people within the local community and those within the socio-political context. In these sectors, there remains a generational legacy of fear and hatred, suspicion and mistrust to be overcome.

## The Strategic Significance of Mar Elias Campus

Mar Elias Campus is well placed in central Galilee and serves a network of over 70 towns and villages with some students coming from Jerusalem and as far south as Beersheva. With the possibility of Mar Elias Campus becoming a university for the region, there is a communal sense of hope and opportunity for Arab students. The language of course delivery is to be English, which will offer a range of advantages in providing a broader selection of programs with the options of building academic relations with international higher education institutions. From the very outset, the Mar Elias Campus has planned to build on sustainable development for the Arab population in the northern region. Despite their smaller number, Arab Christians are a significant influence and force for social and economic development, and for promoting coexistence between Arabs and Jews in the region.

There is a strong basis for professional and leadership development in Galilee. The three remaining Arab Christian villages, Mi'ilya, Fassuta and Tarshiha are situated in the northern region. Significant Christian populations reside in the major towns of Haifa, Nazareth and Akko,

as well as a number of villages such as Kfar Yassif, Jish, Mughar, Shefaram, Maker and Judeideh. Among others, several significant NGOs founded and strongly staffed by Arab Christians are based there – *Mossawa*, a centre for advocacy and public policy related to issues of discrimination, access and equity for the Arab population in Israel; *Adalah*, a successful law agency advocating human rights, and the *Galilee Society for Social Research*, advancing opportunities for Arabs.

With an informed Arab voice in development, there will be a clear direction and thus the opportunity for a significant contribution to a sustainable future. Real equality for the Arab population means valuing their contribution as significant members of the community and valuing their heritage. Assimilationist forces consistently use the catchcry of integration in order to control and manage the population. The promotion of integration, which is perceived by Arabs as negation of their own cultural heritage and aspirations, places scant value on their contribution to community and nation building. Salman and Folkman (2005 p.5) warn that, "the failure to exploit human potential of an entire sector of the population, [the result of] official and informal discrimination, seriously damages the potential for economic growth in Israel." Lederach (2005, p.48) argues that, "constructive change must build responsive processes that address the deep challenges rooted in the relational contexts."

A key opportunity for building linkages will be Mar Elias' involvement in planning and engagement in initiatives in the development of the Galilee region. Contact between Arab and Jewish towns and communities is minimal and, as a counterpoint to Arab villages and towns, exclusive Jewish settlements and towns have been established throughout the region. Grossly inequitable allocation of public resources for Arab infrastructure and services is a source of resentment. This is consistent with the government's strategic plan for economic and social development that, since 1993, has been directed at the Jewish population through increased residential, business and industrial initiatives. (Humphries, 2005, pp.12–13; Galilee Development Authority;[26] and Salman and Folkman, 2005, pp.1–2). Moreover, to date the Arab population has been excluded from this important venture for the future of northern Israel. Development continues overwhelmingly to benefit the Jewish population, yet at 60.1 per cent of the population in the broad region of Haifa and Galilee, Arabs are a significant population just edging into the majority. (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005, p.2). This further suggests that there is a profound need for an alternative vision for a supposed minority of the nation, which comprises nearly a majority in northern Israel and an opportunity to improve the potential for economic growth for all citizens.

Some scholars contend that academic neo-colonialism (Lee, 2004) or academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997) is influencing educational policy development and practice in international higher education. These arguments suggest that any imposed standards, norms, and/or values from the West may be undermining the education-to-work schemes of non-Western countries (Bollag, 2005), particularly if they do so with ulterior motives related to self-interest. Such countries often are seeking assistance and aid from the West to establish newly created, 'home-grown' academic institutions and to build on local expertise. Specific to American philanthropic organisations that fund international educational initiatives, Berman contends that they have propagated a "crude form of economic and military imperialism" to "move nations along the path to development ... in a way to guarantee political stability, economic growth, and minimally, a policy of benevolent neutrality towards the Western bloc" (Berman, 1984, p.254). Evidence suggests that many of these types of cross-border educational providers are unrecognised and rogue (Knight, 2005) or sow further confusion and cheapen academe (Altbach,

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[26] http://www.galilee.gov.il/Home/home.asp

2005). If correct, this picture suggests that there may be varying levels of quality dependent on the transformational processes of international higher education development. Whatever the context in international higher education, increasing emphasis seems to be placed on form rather than substance. The residing fear in non-Western countries and contexts is that form may include inappropriate Western-based influence.

The Mar Elias university project is aspiring to meet this challenge by developing a culturally appropriate academic structure and curricula, together with an appreciation of and skills for effective responsible citizenship. Faculty and students are painfully aware that in the midst of conflict voices of moderation are too often drowned out by fundamentalist viewpoints and actions. At the heart of the Mar Elias University venture is the planned development of an interdisciplinary program of peace studies that will be embedded within the three majors (Communication, Environmental Science and Computing Science) currently offered. Mar Elias Campus is building on the 25-year successful tradition of the Mar Elias Educational Institutions, working with the present lived experience and reality of Arabs and Jews in Israel so that young people can immerse themselves in a web of relationships even with those perceived as enemies. Lederach (2005, p.48) reminds us that "authenticity of social change is ultimately tested in real life relationships."

In light of the many challenges outlined for establishing an Arab Christian Israeli academic institution of higher education, the following encouragement from an Israeli Minister was received with great optimism:

> We think this (Mar Elias) will be a very important campus in the Galilee. … You can see at least a part of the dream realised here now — Christians, Moslems and Jews working together. The teaching of Peace Studies is not dealt with in Israel. The idea of creating and maintaining peace — no department is devoted to that idea. Most of the students in Israeli universities do not have the opportunity to breach the divide. The Department of Security have decided this is very important.[27]

## SUMMARY

The following statements reflect the major issues discussed throughout this paper:

• The conflict between Arabs and Jews in Israel is highly complex, and the narratives of the two peoples have developed primarily due to life experiences, religious beliefs and nationalistic ideologies.

• History has played a major role in the polarisation of these narratives and, in several cases, international and multilateral interventions have been required.

• Arab Christians have been a moderating voice between Arab Muslim and Jewish groups in Israel, yet brain drain through emigration is steadily diminishing this voice.

• An alternative vision is required to rebuild a torn society and empower the people to be architects of their own future.

• Relationship building is aimed at reducing prejudice while encouraging dialogue in divided and distrustful societies such as Israel. It is believed that conditions set by relationship building may well develop towards outcomes of peace building.

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[27] Mr. Ehud Prover, Deputy Director of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Security in an unpublished address to Mar Elias faculty and Board Members, January 2006.

- The establishment of the Mar Elias Educational Institutions is an attempt to (1) educate the youth of a small community in Galilee; (2) raise levels of social stratification equal to that of their Israeli–Jewish counterparts; and, (3) serve as an instrument of pride, empowerment, and aspiration for all Arab citizens of Israel.

- Western notions of education cannot be superimposed into the Mar Elias model. Despite attempts to undermine its existence, MEEI continues to develop a curricular model that best suits its students and the local community-at-large.

## Postscript: Whither the sign of the white dove?

Highly visible across the valley from the village of Ibillin, the mural of a white dove in flight is situated high on a grey concrete wall on the Mar Elias campus. On another wall below is a mural, the unseen qualifier to this universal symbol of peace, of a tattered procession of human shapes, donkeys and bundles reminding all that the Palestinian Arab Diaspora and dispossession of 1948 still continues. Mar Elias is seen to be committed to building a future that encompasses not only a reconciled Israel, but also an internationally focused global outreach where East and West can find mutual trust and complementarity. Whether the sign of the white dove symbolises the myth or reality of peace is yet unanswerable.

Given the points addressed, the conclusion of this discussion raises two important questions: Could international higher education development lead to a multi-tiered post-secondary educational system worldwide? Is there a possible shift in educational policy and practice from one that develops the educational needs of the community to one that concentrates on educational expectations and hope of the individual?

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