

## **BACKGROUND BRIEFING AND REPORT ON GILBOA & JENIN RELATIONSHIP**

***Southern New England Consortium***

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Jewish Communities of Western CT, along with those Federations comprising SNEC, has enjoyed a warm and mutually supportive relationship with the municipalities of Afula/Gilboa in northern Israel going back to a program of the Jewish Agency (JAFI) known as "Project Renewal".

Afula was founded in 1925, and is located in the center of the Jezreel Valley, on the main junction of the roads between the coast, the Samaria Mountains, the Lower Galilee and the Jordan Valley. "The Capital of the Valley" is an anchor and an urban center for the settlements and residents of the valley, and provides key services to all the settlements in the region. The city has an industrial zone that includes several large factories. Emek Medical Center, located in the city, serves residents throughout the area and the north.

Afula is located 12 km or approximately seven miles from the West Bank Palestinian city of Jenin, and has historically been a target for "terrorist organizations" because of its location and accessibility. Afula has approximately 42,000 residents, spread throughout in the city's three main areas of Afula Illit, Givat HaMoreh and the city. In the 1990's, Afula absorbed thousands of immigrants from Ethiopia and the Former Soviet Union. Approximately 30% of the city's residents are new immigrants. The city boasts a rich array of cultural and recreational activities, including theater, art and music.

The Gilboa Regional Council was founded in 1949, and is comprised of 32 settlements: 8 kibbutzim, 14 moshavim, 5 community villages and 5 Arab villages. The history of the settlements in the region is intertwined with the history of the valley, from the establishment of the first kibbutzim in the 1920's, through the waves of Aliyah from North Africa that founded the moshavim in the Ta'anach, and the establishment in 1987 of Gan Ner, a community village.

The Gilboa Regional Council has approximately 23,000 residents, 40% of them Israeli Arabs. The kibbutzim and moshavim cultivate crops and engage in other agricultural pursuits. In addition, there are several factories from various industries. Many of the Regional Council's residents find employment outside of the regional council. The Gilboa shares the longest "confrontation" or seam line with the Palestinian Authority and the community of Jenin.

As you may recall, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008 a front page story emerged in the New York Times entitled, "A West Bank Ruin, Reborn as a Peace Beacon." The article read, in part that, "The head of the Gilboa regional council, Daniel Atar, is a Jew and his deputy, Eid Salem, is an Arab Israeli."

"Together they have built a warm relationship with the Palestinian governor of the Jenin area, Qadoura Moussa. The three meet frequently to formulate plans for economic cooperation in agriculture and commerce. Together, they have visited the French-German border area and Switzerland, seeking models of coexistence."

Based on our previous involvement with the Gilboa and Jenin, we recognize how imperative the issue of co-existence is for Israel's continued existence, for Jewish and Arab Israelis and the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. Back in the late 1990's we viewed this growing demographic reality as a direct security threat for Israel, no different than Syria or Lebanon or even the PNA would have on Israel's ability to survive. The unique feature today is the diminution of the threat of terror from Jenin, which is located within the heart of Israel.

In November 2009 a group of representatives of the Western CT Federation, including two past presidents and Rob Zwang, the Executive Director of the Federation, met with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Gilboa and the Governor of Jenin for two hours of discussion at a kibbutz on the border with Gilboa and Jenin.

Discussions centered on the warm and developing relationship between the mayors and governor, their efforts to build economic ties between their borders, and how our local Federation could assist these two communities in fostering close ties between their people.

A number of ideas emerged from the discussions between our Federation and the regional leadership. One idea included our Federation providing economic assistance to purchase blankets, so the people of Gilboa might present the blankets as a good will gesture to the neediest people of Jenin.

We discussed ways our Federation might introduce the mayors and governor to individuals within our local community and the North American Jewish community, whose businesses or business relationships might contribute to the goal of fostering peaceful coexistence between the people of Gilboa and Jenin. We also discussed the Jenin Governor coming to the US for the first time.

As a result of these discussions and special permissions from both our State Department and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, in late August 2009 our Federation brought Danny Atar, Eid Salem and Governor Moussa to our community for four days.

Governor Moussa and his partners in peace maintained a demanding but fruitful schedule of private and public meetings throughout their visit. The overwhelmingly positive response our guests received was reinforced by their obvious warmth and supportive personal friendship and the genuine mutual respect they share. Their personal relationship and collective pursuit for peaceful coexistence may very well prove to be the most significant and enduring value of their visit.

There were specific objectives we sought to accomplish through the initiative we call "Expanding the Circle of Peace." Bringing our guests to the USA was the beginning of a broad agenda intended to suggest that our North American Jewish community and the North American Palestinian community could play a vital role in helping to promote peaceful coexistence, from the ground up.

We reached out to the preeminent national voice for our Jewish community represented by Malcolm I. Hoenlein, Executive Vice Chairman for The Conference of Presidents of Major National Jewish Organizations, based in Manhattan, NY. We also worked with Dr. Ziad J. Asali, President and Founder of the American Task Force on Palestine, based in Washington, DC. We introduced Governor Moussa and the Gilboa Mayors to local, state and national officials and transmitted the message of cooperation and coexistence throughout the US via broad communications and national media.

Many officials who participated in our activities either expressed their direct support for our role in bringing the three men together to the US, and/or in the Gilboa leadership and Governor Moussa's efforts. They, and we, wish to realize the sovereignty of both the Jewish State of Israel, and a future Palestinian State living side by side, working and growing together.

**As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told US Jewish leaders in July, one avenue "for ending the conflict is to push forward the spread of prosperity." Netanyahu said, "This idea of advancing economic peace is not a substitute for achieving political peace; it's a way to facilitate it. It makes peace more possible and more worthwhile for the Palestinians..."**

"I greatly appreciated the opportunity recently to meet with your guests, Governor Qaddoura Moussa and Mayor Daniel Attar. The work done by these men, with support from their friends here in the United States is enriching the lives of people on both sides of the border." – Christopher S. Murphy, Congressman, United States House of Representatives.

"I was honored and privileged to participate in the inspiring and moving visit of Governor Qaddoura, Mayor Daniel Attar, and Deputy Mayor Ead Saleem. Their dialogue and example of cooperation offers hope for peace and stability in the region." – Richard Blumenthal, Attorney General of the State of Connecticut."

Working with a successful New York strategic communications and public relations firm and the UJC Director of Communications & Media Relations, Joe Berkofsky, the visit of Governor Moussa, together with the Israeli leaders, was well received by print and electronic media.

UJC's staff developed press releases that were delivered to a list of over 6600 individual media outlets, including local, regional and national press, and included major newspapers, business and philanthropy publications and regional TV and radio news stations.

National targets included cable and network news shows. In all there were over 100 (posted) clippings from web sites alone. Three highly respected, international print media outlets and three local front page stories devoted considerable coverage to the efforts being led by Abu Moussa, Danny Attar and Eid Saleem.

A press conference was held by the Conference of Presidents of Major National Jewish Organizations, in Manhattan, New York. Hosting a Palestinian leader of the particular position and stature as Qaddoura M. Qaddoura was an historic decision, which set precedent for this key umbrella organization. The Conference represents the largest organizations within the North American Jewish community.

In advance of the Governor's trip to the US, our Federation participated in the development of a National Public Broadcasting System program, based in Jenin and highlighting the relationship between the Governor and Mayor Danny Attar.

On November 4<sup>th</sup> we received a letter of invitation from the Gilboa Regional Council to attend an important ceremony celebrating the opening of the border crossing between the Gilboa Region and Jenin District, taking place the following Tuesday, November 10th, 2009.

This event was highly significant as it represented one more positive step in the relationship between the Gilboa Regional Council and Jenin Governorate. Not only can cars now pass through the border crossing; it marks the beginning of new economic opportunities for the people of Jenin and is an important moment in the story of coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians of this region.

This road carries symbolic implications for our efforts in the region and for our partners' mutually beneficial cooperation. In addition to being asked to participate in this important ceremony, we were also asked to participate in a special meeting between key leadership of the Israeli government, the US Ambassador to Israel and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

**Among diplomats and politicians who participated in the event were:**

- Tony Blair - Quartet Representative in the Middle East
- James B. Cunningham - U.S. Ambassador to Israel (represented by Luis Moreno, Deputy Chief of Mission)
- Awad Duaibes – Political & Media Advisor for the office of the Quartet Representative, RT Hon Tony Blair
- Avishay Braverman - Minorities Minister
- Silvan Shalom - Vice Prime Minister, Minister for Regional Development
- Matan Vilnai - Deputy Minister of Defense
- Danny Atar - Mayor, Gilboa Regional Council
- Mussa Qadoura - Governor, Jenin Governorate
- Eid Saleem - Deputy Mayor, Gilboa Regional Council

The interest of having us participate in this meeting was in large part based on the personal, deep relationships we hold with the leadership in the Gilboa and the many years of demonstrating our personal and financial support for their unique situation in Northern Israel. But it is also because we first introduced a new twist on an existing concept of Mr. Blair: to make possible the viability of a duty free economic development zone on the seam line between the Gilboa and Jenin, for trade between Israel and the Palestinians.

Prior to our mission, Sydney Perry, Executive Director for the New Haven Jewish Federation introduced us to two Yale University professors. Gustav Ranis is the Frank Altschul Professor Emeritus in Yale's department of International Economics. He and Bruce Wexler, Professor of Psychiatry, made an offer to our three partners, which we delivered on our recent visit.

The offer was for the prospect of creating a formal business plan for both the Gilboa and Jenin, in support of the duty free zone. The offer of creating a formal business plan is considered a means to attract private philanthropy and "social investors" to move the formation of the industrial zone forward. As Prime Minister Netanyahu told a group of my colleagues on a recent closed conference call, this type of financial investment between Israel and the Palestinians isn't a replacement for formal negotiations, but could help prepare the ground, ultimately resulting in "greasing the track" for political negotiations in the future.

As I wrote to Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salaam Fayad, "we know the significance of what the Jewish State of Israel means to Jews throughout the world. Those of us old enough to remember appreciate the many struggles over decades of nation building. We believe that creating "a living bridge" between Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Druze, Christians, and Muslims alike, can foster a better understanding and more peaceful ties. We wish for you what we wished for ourselves, that the Palestinian people will soon realize the achievement of a sovereign, Palestinian State."

Lastly, the ramifications of this summer's visit by our esteemed guests continue to unfold. We hope to sustain our support to help build a living bridge between our two people, strengthening the economic ties between the Gilboa and Jenin, and supporting this Palestinian government's efforts to develop close ties between the Palestinian and Israeli people.

***To learn more about activities to date, including photos, video of the blanket ceremony and other press coverage and letters from state and federal officials, go to our web site at [www.jfed.net](http://www.jfed.net).***