



AMERICANS BACK BETHLEHEM - BUT ARE NOT SURE WHERE IT IS

For immediate release. Two Nation survey: America vs Bethlehem.
Press Conference: 12pm noon, Thursday 21/12/2006 Bethlehem
University. Bethlehem. Details below.

Most Americans believe Bethlehem is an Israeli town inhabited by a mixture of Jews and Muslims, a pre-Christmas survey of US perceptions of the town has shown.

Only 15 per cent of Americans realise that it is a Palestinian city with a mixed Christian-Muslim community, lying in the occupied West Bank.

The nationwide survey, carried out by top US political pollsters Zogby International, canvassed 15000 American respondents. The poll was commissioned by the campaign organisation **Open Bethlehem** to coincide with a survey carried out in Bethlehem itself – canvassing 1,000 respondents from the three urban centres of Bethlehem, where the population splits almost equally between Muslims and Christians.

The surveys have put the spotlight on the plight of the town, which has been fast losing its indigenous Christian population since the construction of the Israeli wall plunged Bethlehem into economic crisis.

The two surveys show that American perceptions of the town are wildly at odds with the perceptions of those who live there.

While the Christians of Bethlehem overwhelmingly (78%) blame the exodus of Christians from the town on Israel's blockade, Americans are more likely (45.9%) to blame it on Islamic politics and are reluctant (7.4%) to blame Israel.

And while four out of ten Americans believe that the wall exists for Israel's security, more than nine out of ten Bethlehemites believe it is part of a plan by Israel to confiscate Palestinian land.



The Zogby survey shows strong support for the town in the US, where 65.5% of the population want the UN to list it as a world heritage site. Americans are also strongly in favour (80.6%) of Bethlehem retaining a strong Christian presence.

Americans are also ambivalent about the Israeli wall, with 31.5% in favour of it, with another 31.6% opposed.

But more than two-thirds of Americans believe Bethlehem is unsafe to visit, while 80% of Bethlehemites consider their town safe for visitors.

While the US survey showed that Americans are sceptical about Muslims and Christians living contentedly alongside each other – only 17% thought they lived together in peaceful coexistence – the Palestinian survey showed they do: around 90% of Christians said they had Muslim friends, and vice-versa.

The Israeli government could well be shaken by the discovery that Americans' tolerance of the wall would be strained by the discovery that it separates communities and families, cuts Bethlehem off from Jerusalem, and requires the seizure of privately-owned land.

US Christians, meanwhile, are likely to be shocked by the discovery that seven out of ten Christians in Bethlehem believe Israel treats the town's Christian heritage with brutality or indifference.

The Bethlehem poll, which was carried out by the Palestinian Centre for research and Cultural Dialogue, shows on the other hand that more than two-thirds (73.3%) of Bethlehem's Christians believe that the Palestinian Authority treats Christian heritage with respect. That result will surprise some who believe that the election of Hamas has strained Christian-Muslim relations in the town.

Leila Sansour, Open Bethlehem's Chief Executive, says: "Our US poll shows overwhelming support for Bethlehem's Christian heritage, yet our survey of Bethlehem's own citizens shows the city cannot retain this heritage and its Christian community while the wall remains.



“The choice is stark. Either the wall stays and Bethlehem ceases to be a Christian town. Or Bethlehem retains its Christian population – in which case the wall has to come down. The international community needs to wake up to what is happening and choose.”

KEY FINDINGS OF THE TWO SURVEYS

- 1) 59.1 % of Americans thought that the population of Bethlehem was either Muslim or Jewish or a mix of both. Only 15.6 % knew it was a mix of Christians and Muslims.
- 2) When asked where the city was located 58% of Americans thought it was in Israel. Only 26% knew that the town of Jesus birth was located in the Occupied Territories.
- 3) When told that the population of Bethlehem is a mix of Christians and Muslims 25.1% of Americans thought that they lived together in bitter dispute while only 17 % thought they lived together in peaceful coexistence. 26.4 % thought it was neither.
- 4) In the Bethlehem survey 87.5% of Muslims said they had Christian friends and 92.2% of Christians said they had Muslim friends.
- 5) The Bethlehem poll shows that 22.4% of Bethlehem residents regard unemployment as their main problem, 5.9% cite emigration, 4.3% think it is the expropriation of their land by Israel – and 67.4% see it as a combination of these four factors. When asked about the key current factor in the crisis: 38.1% of respondents said the Israeli occupation, 39.7% blamed the Israeli wall while 19.2% looked to the rifts within their own society.
- 6) A large number of Americans respondents (36.9%) were not aware of the Israeli wall in and around Bethlehem. Of those who knew, equal numbers of Americans either supported or opposed the wall: 31.5% supported 31.6% opposed.
- 7) The American poll showed that 40.6% of Americans thought that the wall is there for Israel’s security, while 19.4% thought that the wall is there to confiscate land from Bethlehem residents for the sake of Israel’s expansion.
- 8) In Bethlehem, 6% of respondents believe the wall is a temporary measure, while 91.1% regard it as a premeditated plan by Israel to confiscate their land. The wall features as a bigger problem for



- Christians: 42.1% of Christians refer to it as the key problem facing the city, as opposed to 36.3% of Muslims.
- 9) In the last 5 years about 400 Christian families left Bethlehem. When asked for the reason 45.9% of Americans thought it was the rise of Islamic extremism while only 7.4% attributed their exodus to the Israeli occupation.
 - 10) In stark contrast, 78% of Bethlehem's Christians said they were leaving because of the Israeli occupation – while only 3.2% blamed the rise of Islamic movements. 12.5% attributed it to both.
 - 11) 75% of people in Bethlehem said they are depressed by family members moving abroad. Among those who chose to stay, 20.5% said that work or family commitments were the major deterrents.
 - 12) 63.2% of Bethlehem Christians have at least one relative who has emigrated, against 32,8% of Muslims. When asked if many of their relatives have left the country, the contrast sharpens: Christian respondents stand at 20.1%, against 5.4% among Muslims.
 - 13) 50.7% of Bethlehem Christians have thought of emigrating, against 43.6% among Muslims.
 - 14) 15.7% of Bethlehem Christians said they are in the process of emigrating – against 8.3% among Muslims. Worryingly, 19.2% of those are young and 36% have BA degrees or above. Of those in the process of emigrating, 72.45% are male.
 - 15) Americans think that more Muslim lands than Christian lands have been confiscated by Israel: Muslims 18.4% Christians 3.6% Both: 34.5%.
 - 16) 54.7% of Bethlehem Christians said they had relatives whose land was confiscated by Israel. 41.7% of Muslims said the same .
 - 17) 65.3% of people in Bethlehem said they have had family members or friends arrested for political reasons. (74.5% muslim, 59%Christian)
 - 18) 41.5% of people in Bethlehem said they had either a member of their family or a friend killed by the Israeli army- 53.9% muslim, 32.9% Christian
 - 19) 65.9% of Christians in Bethlehem think Israel treats Christian heritage with either brutality or indifference. (rising to 76% for those respondents over the age of 60)
 - 20) 73.3% of Christians in Bethlehem believe PA treats Christian heritage with respect.



- 21) 86.1% of people in Bethlehem think churches should do more to help the city. 74.7% think the world knows little about situation.
- 22) 43.1% of people in Bethlehem see “Fear of the pro Israeli lobby” as the key factor behind the lack of action among international community while 14.2% think it is lack of understanding. 17.9% attribute it to general indifference.
- 23) 53.2% of people in Bethlehem believe that international pressure is key to resolving the situation while 18.9% think that the solution will come through a change in Israeli politics. Only 7.6% trust that help will come from Arab countries.
- 24) 75.7% of people in Bethlehem thought that most people in the world would like to visit Bethlehem while only 17.1% of Americans said they are likely to do so.
- 25) Americans saw the major interest in Bethlehem in the following order:
 - 59.6% Visit the church of the Nativity
 - 44.9% Walk the biblical route of the Holy family
 - 36.8% experience the life of the local community
 - 30.7% Visit Solomons pools
 - 29 % Visit Desert monasteries
 - 26.8 % Visit Shepherds Fields.
 - A majority - 60.4% - said they would visit Bethlehem for the historic nature of the city, against those interested in pilgrimage (30.8%).
- 26) A 69% majority of Americans thought Bethlehem was unsafe and saw safety as a key deterrent to visiting while 81.3% of people in Bethlehem believed that Bethlehem was either very safe or somewhat safe.
- 27) When asked about what factors would make them less supportive of the wall in Bethlehem Americans put their reasons in the following order of importance:
 1. the wall hurts the life of communities regardless of their faith or ethnic background 48.7%.
 2. The wall separates some Bethlehem families from one another 40%.
 3. The wall requires the seizure of privately owned land 38.7%



4. The wall separates Bethlehem and Jerusalem, two cities that have been historically interlinked and interdependent. 36.6%
 5. The wall jeopardises the sustainability of Bethlehem's Christian community. 30.5%
 6. The wall has been condemned by local and International churches 25.8%
 7. The wall has been condemned by the international court of justice. 25.2%
- 28) 74.4% of Americans believe it is necessary to protect the rights of Christian communities wherever they are. 71 % agree that preserving the Christian community in Bethlehem will protect and strengthen the Christian heritage of Bethlehem. 42.8% say believe that preserving the Christian heritage of Bethlehem will strengthen Christian communities worldwide.
- 29) 84.5% of people in Bethlehem said they were proud of being Bethlehemites and only 4.8% said they would have preferred to come from somewhere else.

A Brief analysis from Leila Sansour (CEO of Open Bethlehem)

"This is the first time that such surveys have been carried out. The findings are of great importance to us. We know that Bethlehem is very isolated from the world and that little is known about us, but after the survey we are confident that more can be done to bridge this gap. It is obvious from the two surveys how many misconceptions Americans have about our city, but also encouraging to learn that they care most about those issues that concern our own citizens: community, faith, property and our heritage. It was, perhaps, sobering to contrast the widespread certainty, here in Bethlehem, that the world is desperate to visit our city against the fact that so few Americans are actually tempted to do so. We understand that the impression of lack of safety is a major deterrent. We also know how forbidding the wall appears, when one approaches our city. We need to work hard to send out our message how safe and welcoming Bethlehem is. It was particularly encouraging to learn that Americans would cite their main reason for opposing the wall as the fact that it hurts the life of communities regardless of their faith or ethnic background. This is how we want to think of ourselves. Our community has embraced diversity for centuries. It is a place where Muslims and Christians have always lived



together in harmony and continue to do so, despite the increasing polarisation of our modern world whose mood occasionally influences even our own environment.

“It is also encouraging to discover that despite the current situation in Bethlehem a slight majority of Bethlehemites (53.8%) remain optimistic about the future of our city. It was also gratifying to learn that 44.1% of Americans would contribute to help preserve the heritage of Bethlehem. We will continue working with the knowledge that we have friends and potential allies in the States. As more American learn about our situation, this can only improve the hope for peace.

“Our US poll shows overwhelming support for Bethlehem’s Christian heritage, yet our survey of Bethlehem’s own citizens shows the city cannot retain this heritage and its Christian community while the wall remains. The Israeli blockade and the land annexations by Israel are strangling Bethlehem, forcing its Christian population to seek livelihoods abroad.

“The choice is stark. Either the wall stays and Bethlehem ceases to be a Christian town. Or Bethlehem retains its Christian population – in which case the wall has to come down. The international community needs to wake up to what is happening and choose.”

Footnotes:

Reports of the surveys will be available on Open Bethlehem website www.openbethlehem.org

The survey will be presented at a press conference with Bethlehem governor Mr Salah Al Taamari and Open Bethlehem CEO Leila Sansour alongside local Bethlehemites who can expand on issues raised by the survey in questions from the press.

12pm, Thursday 21/12/2006 at Bethlehem University, Bethlehem.

Press packs will be made available with all the polling data and a full briefing on Bethlehem with detailed maps, photographs and regional reports. Further details can be obtained from the Open Bethlehem office.



For more information, interviews, maps, photos or survey reports please contact:

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