

Palestinians and Israelis Give Peace a Chance at Children's Clinic

by: Steven Erlanger, the Jerusalem Bureau Chief of The New York Times

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Jerusalem - The elegant stonework, arched bell tower, vast courtyard and crusader crosses of the Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem stem from an earlier time, when imperial Germany wanted a foothold in the Middle East. On Friday, [April 1] the hospital opened the first paediatric oncology unit for Palestinians, a small step toward better health for children.

This should be a simple story. But it is about Palestinians and Israelis, so it is intricate. Even nice stories like this one are so shaded with emotional sensitivities that goodness can become hard work.

Augusta Victoria, with 161 beds, is the second-largest hospital in East Jerusalem, and is largely underwritten by the Lutheran World Federation and by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

The new clinic is a joint project of Augusta Victoria, the Israeli Peres Centre for Peace, a variety of Italian foundations and the Hadassah University Hospital in Jerusalem, which provided training, for a fee, for the oncologist, Dr. Yusri Saifi, and a nursing staff of four. The project is an outgrowth of a complicated nexus of aid, training and political nuance provided by the Italians, the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves.

Hadassah sees it as a good work, helping Palestinians through the agency of Dr. Michael Weintraub, the director of the hospital's Paediatric Hemato-Oncology unit. Hadassah has been publicizing its association with projects like this one, often to the irritation of Palestinian partners.

Dr. Tawfiq Nasser, the first Palestinian director of Augusta Victoria, which largely serves Palestinian refugees and the poor with the help of the Lutheran World Federation, is as passionate about maintaining Palestinian equity and pride in the project as he is about the building itself.

Dr. Dan Shanit, director of the Peres Centre's medical and health care department, has coordinated the project. He is a fan of Dr. Nasser's and is nervous about publicity that gives Israel or "the women of Hadassah in New York" too much credit for "a cross-border project like this one that is a partnership."

He has worked for more than five years to open a Palestinian paediatric cancer centre, and he was frustrated once before by the Palestinian Authority's reluctance to allow a large hospital in Gaza, where it was originally to be located, enter into a partnership with a hospital in Tel Aviv. Now the clinic is a nongovernmental project, financed mostly by

Italians.

Hadassah "is just one of many hospitals that take part in such projects, and Palestinian partners are terribly sensitive and don't want to be used as propaganda," Dr. Shanit said. He credits Dr. Nasser and Augusta Victoria for understanding the need for such a centre "and grabbing it."

About 70 percent of children who are found to have can be cured, and every year in the West Bank alone, about 150 Palestinian children receive a diagnosis of cancer. Given the \$50,000 to \$100,000 cost of treatment in Israel, "most of those children won't be treated or will be misdiagnosed and then it's too late," Dr. Weintraub said. "Opening a paediatric oncology centre in Palestine is the best answer."

However, the Israeli separation barrier - here a 35-foot concrete wall - cuts off the hospital from most of its clientele, which is poor, not covered by Israeli health insurance and includes patients from all over the West Bank.

Dr. Nasser, 40, is a Christian and a Palestinian nationalist who says he sees projects like this one as "peace through health - trying to address fear on the Israeli side and anger on the Palestinian side." He lives in Ramallah, in the West Bank, and commutes through Israeli military checkpoints every day, like most of his staff. The hospital has a bus service for both staff and patients, coordinated with the army, that cuts the time they spend at Israel's many checkpoints around the barrier.

"It's tiring," he said. "I have to run a hospital and a bus company, too."

Dr. Nasser's own sensitivities about the Israeli involvement are echoed in his staff.

"We refuse any relationship of occupied and occupier," he said. "Our doctors feel equal, so there you don't have negativity and partiality. And I'm very comfortable with my national ambitions, and I'm not compromising them by dealing with the Israelis this way."

In fact, he said, "it's good for the Israelis to see the professional and caring side of Palestinians, and for Palestinians to see that not all Israelis are at checkpoints."

Asked if he protested too much, he laughed and said: "It's more difficult for us than for the Israelis. We have the anger. We have the lack of resources. I have to convince my doctors that partnership doesn't mean that the Israelis are taking over the hospital."

The oncologist, Dr. Saifi, a quiet and thoughtful man, says he is worried about the ability of the Palestinian Authority to keep its financial commitments, about the need for better pathology and intensive care units and the lack of radiated and filtered blood for his patients.

"I have a lot of questions in my mind about how to manage," he said.

But in some ways this is also a simple story, or a simpler one, of two doctors, Dr. Weintraub and Dr. Saifi, one Israeli and one Palestinian, who worked closely to save the lives of children who would otherwise die.

Dr. Weintraub, 47, and Dr. Saifi, 40, have a strong relationship of mutual admiration and care. And there is love here, too.

"He brings a lot of commitment to this and a lot of courage," Dr. Weintraub said of Dr. Saifi. "I work in a great academic institution with every resource. But he's starting something, and by himself. He's an experienced paediatrician, but this is a very difficult profession, emotionally and physically. It's a major challenge, and he's up to it."

Dr. Saifi, showing visitors the area for the new clinic shortly before it opened, said of Dr. Weintraub: "He's a real man. He doesn't just make advertisements. He told me he'd be with me all the time, for consultations and help." He stopped, and his voice broke a little. "He's inspiring to me," he said. "He's a good manager and a good man. I love him."