

Lincoln native seeks Israeli-Palestinian

By Don Walton
of The Lincoln Star

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Virgil Falloon is a citizen of the world who obviously believes one person can make a difference.

Since August, the former Lincolnite has been executive director of a Washington-based citizens' organization which is promoting peace in the Mideast by seeking a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

"SEARCH for Justice and Equality in Palestine/Israel" hopes to influence adoption of a more even-handed American policy which supports a settlement "on the basis of the inalienable rights of both peoples."

The American people now receive a "one-sided" view of the dispute, Falloon says.

"The pro-Israeli bias is so strong that it ultimately makes a peaceful solution

to the conflict almost impossible. It is not in the interests of the United States not to recognize that the Palestinians have human rights.

"Until the United States is willing to come forward and recognize that injustices are being done, it will never be involved in the peace process."

SEARCH is not anti-Israeli, Falloon is quick to point out.

It was founded by a Jew, and its membership is one-third Jewish, one-third Arab and one-third other Americans.

"We want justice and equality for both peoples, and we want to be sure the American people hear both sides of the story," he says.

Falloon began to identify with the world outside Nebraska — and outside the United States — when, as a youth, he

went to northern Kenya in 1972 to do volunteer work for a mission. Soon he was helping build an airstrip in southern Sudan.

Questions began to form in his head.

How could a population be starving to death in a country rich in agricultural resources? Why did corporations come in to pump out oil and plant export crops in a country which could be feeding its own starving people? Why did distribution of American Food for Peace commodities fail to stop the starvation?

The young Lincolnite returned to the United States with a sense of "belonging to the world." Filled with "lots of questions," he sought to expand his global perspective by majoring in history and learning Arabic at Georgetown University.

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During his junior year, he went abroad to Cairo where he encountered his first Russians, whom President Anwar Sadat was in the process of systematically expelling from Egypt.

"That totally destroyed my perception of Russia as just the Big Bear of communism.

Falloon completed his work at Georgetown, and then earned a law degree at the University of Nebraska with an eye toward "acquiring a legal background which I could combine with my Mideast background to be most effective in working for causes I believed to be legitimate and just."

Back in the Mideast again in 1982 as a legal research volunteer for Law in the Service of Man, the West Bank affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, Falloon lived at the center of the conflict, along the West Bank of the Jordan River.

His job: "To look at the legal system which exists under the Israeli military occupation and to see that the rule of law was being followed."

After the year's assignment, Falloon and his wife stayed for another year working with Quakers in the West Bank. Falloon's wife taught at a private school for girls, and he became its building and grounds superintendent.

After their return to the United States, the offer came from SEARCH.

"I really believe it's a movement, a coalition, that could be very influential in the next five years or so," Falloon says.

"It's a grassroots process, long-term, one we need to take step by step.

"We want to get the Palestinians and the Israelis talking. We would never advocate a particular political solution; we just want to encourage the dialogue."

Falloon said he is encouraged by the sudden American awareness and concern for the plight of blacks in South Africa.

"I hope one day that the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma is raised to that level, hopefully before more radical elements are allowed to engage themselves in armed conflict which, we fear, could ultimately escalate to the use of nuclear weapons."