

## **Advancing a Just Peace in the Middle East**

### **Introduction**

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has had a long-standing policy of endorsing the most widely accepted path to peace in the Middle East, the “two-state solution”. The two-state solution calls for establishment of a viable, independent Palestinian state living side-by-side peacefully with its neighbor Israel. This plan respects the rights, aspirations, and obligations of both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. Our organization, Presbyterians for Middle East Peace, is committed to keeping the Presbyterian Church on this path.

At the 220<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian General Assembly in Pittsburgh this summer, commissioners will be asked to endorse a series of proposals that we believe deviate sharply from the principles that advance the two-state solution. The Assembly will be asked to:

*Declare Israel an “apartheid state”*

*Encourage investment funds associated with the denomination to divest from companies engaged in commerce with Israel*

*Endorse documents such as the Kairos Palestine document, the “Amman Call”, and the “Bethlehem Call”, that 1) promote boycott, divestment and sanction tactics directed against Israel in the name of solidarity with Palestinian Christians; 2) demand that Israel vacate the disputed Palestinian territories unilaterally and unconditionally (“end the occupation”), with no clear guarantee from the Palestinian people for the security for the people of Israel; and 3) embrace a stark white-black depiction of the people of Israel as oppressors and Palestinians as oppressed people seeking nothing more than freedom and the right of self-determination*

In the secular world, advocates of such proposals are generally referred to as the International BDS Movement (Boycott/Divest/Sanction). In contrast to the principles behind the two-state solution, many BDS advocates highlight the rights of Palestinians and the obligations of Israelis, not the rights and obligations of both peoples. BDS is built upon a depiction of the circumstances in the Middle East that is factually inaccurate and therefore not credible. Most importantly, we believe that BDS will not advance the cause of peace. Indeed, it may lead the Palestinians to entrench in their current positions in hopes that BDS will force Israel to cave in to their demands.

The intent of this paper is to provide Presbyterians with the facts that have too often been missing from Presbyterian discussions on Middle East peace. We do not seek to attack or belittle those with differing views. Rather, we attempt to provide the set of facts upon which our views are based. We hope you find it helpful.

## **The Presbyterian Commitment to the Two-State Solution**

The two-state solution is based on recognizing the rights, aspirations, and obligations of both Israelis and Palestinians. In particular:

*The right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and freedom*

*The right of the people of Israel to security, peace, and freedom from violent attack*

In addition, both peoples have obligations. For Israelis the obligations are centered upon:

*Coming to agreement with Palestinian leaders on the borders between Israel and an independent Palestinian state*

*Withdrawal of Israeli security forces from the agreed upon territories and recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state*

*Acknowledgment that many of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank will ultimately reside in the state of Palestine*

For Palestinians, obligations of the future Palestinian state include:

*Demonstrating a sustainable commitment to peaceful coexistence with its neighbor Israel*

*Respecting Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, just as Israel respects the proposed Palestinian state as the homeland of Palestinians*

*Maintaining the rule of law, and not permitting independent armed militias to operate within its borders or attacks to be launched on Israel*

*Provide its citizens with basic rights of free speech and participation in an open and democratic political process*

*Respect the rights of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities*

As we will demonstrate, both peoples have made efforts at meeting these goals and obligations, with, so far, only partial success. We believe, however, that these principles and the two-state solution remain the best path to peace and should not be abandoned. The European Union, United States, Russia and U.N. (the "Quartet") also continue to affirm the two-state solution as the only viable option for peace. The PCUSA needs to restate its commitment to peace and reject the BDS effort to apply pressure on only one of the two parties in this tragic situation.

## **How BDS Ignores Important Facts and Realities**

Over the course of the last decade the government of Israel initiated a plan to end the conflict unilaterally, just as the BDS movement has advocated, with a policy called "disengagement". The first phase of disengagement was removal of all Israeli security forces and Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The hope was that this concrete action would build momentum for peace, and that after successful implementation of Israeli disengagement in Gaza, the same process of withdrawal could be implemented in the West Bank. Since, 2005, there have been no Israeli settlers, nor permanent Israeli security presence, in Gaza.

Rather than leading to peace as promised, ending the occupation in Gaza has made the situation worse for Israelis and Palestinians alike. After the full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005,

Palestinians held general elections in 2006. The militant movement Hamas was voted into power by the Palestinian people, winning a majority of legislative seats. The election of Hamas laid bare the stark divisions within Palestinian society between those seeking peaceful coexistence with Israel through the two-state solution, and those committed to the destruction of Israel and rejection of peaceful coexistence. These divisions remain a major obstacle to a long-term peace.

### **The Charter of Hamas**

The Charter of Hamas is a document that clearly states the goals of Hamas and their stance on peace with Israel. Translated into English, it is available from several sources on the Internet. Anyone interested in fully understanding the challenges that must be overcome for permanent peace should take the time to read the entire document. It can be accessed at the link: <http://www.mideastweb.org/hamas.htm>.

The following are excerpts from the Charter of Hamas:

*"Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it." (The Martyr, Imam Hassan al-Banna, of blessed memory)*

*"The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up. "*

*"There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors."*

*"After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying."*

The most ominous element of the Charter is the following text, from article 7 of the Charter:

*"The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) aspires to the realisation of Allah's promise, no matter how long that should take. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said:*

*"The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Muslims, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree, would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews." (related by al-Bukhari)."*

It must be noted here that no such text exists in the Koran, nor is any such belief held by the overwhelming majority of Muslims. It is a terrible example of how a small group of religious fanatics can distort and pervert the teachings of their faith. It is an unfortunate reality, however, that fanatical groups such as Hamas have built a significant base in Gaza following Israel's ending the occupation there.

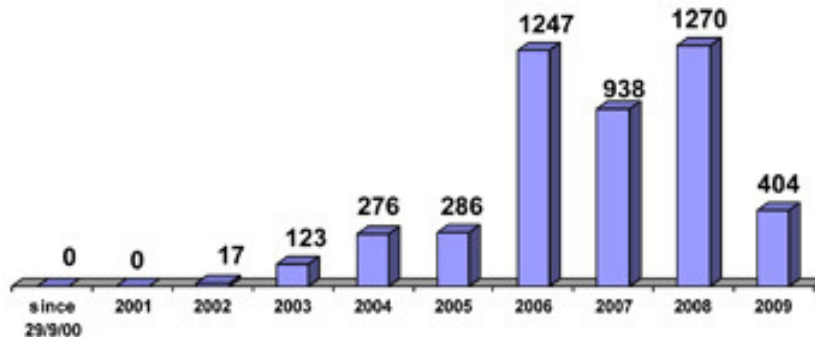
### **The Hamas Takeover of Gaza**

In 2007, the situation worsened, with Hamas violently taking over the Gaza Strip and forcibly ejecting security forces of the Palestinian Authority, while the PA retained control of the West Bank. Rather than ruling democratically, Hamas used violence to eradicate any opposition in Gaza, and Christians and Muslims alike have suffered under Hamas' rule. Hamas is provided

backing and weapons by Iran, and shares the goal of Israel's destruction with Iran-backed Hezbollah, the militant organization which now effectively controls Lebanon.

Thousands of rockets (shown below) have been fired at Israel from Gaza subsequent to the takeover by Hamas, prompting the return of Israeli defense forces to Gaza in late 2008 in what was called "Operation Cast Lead". Israeli forces withdrew in early 2009, and Hamas to this day governs Gaza, effectively controlling 40% of the Palestinian population.

### Distribution of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip



### The Situation Today

Hamas continues to unequivocally reject peace with Israel and remains committed to Israel's destruction. In December of 2011 Hamas held massive celebrations in Gaza to celebrate the movement's 24th anniversary. The comments and actions by Hamas' leaders once again called for violence and the destruction of Israel. Hamas boasted that it has killed 1,365 Israelis in over 1,117 attacks (including 87 suicide bombings), and launched 11,093 rockets at Israeli targets. Ismail Haniyeh, the top Hamas leader in Gaza, stated: "The armed resistance and the armed struggle are our only choice to liberate the land, to liberate all of Palestine from the sea to the river and expel the invaders." The rally in Gaza was attended by school children dressed in military uniforms and carrying fake rockets and rifles.

The actions and rhetoric of Hamas stand in sharp contrast to the very concrete peacemaking actions taking place on the West Bank where, under the leadership of Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, substantial progress has been made. Palestinian security forces have been trained, and Israeli security forces have been able to turn security responsibilities progressively over to Palestinians. Violence has been reduced. Prime Minister Fayyad has established credibility with both Israel and the international community. The West Bank is seeing good economic growth, with Israel's support and cooperation. Most importantly, the lives of ordinary Palestinians are improving.

Even in the West Bank, however, Palestinian Authority leadership, including Palestinian President Abbas, frequently send a contradictory message to Israel and the international community that foments distrust and hinders the peace process. An example of this occurred last Fall in the use of a logo for the Palestinian Mission to the United Nations. The logo shows Palestine encompassing Gaza, the West Bank and all of Israel. That logo is still on its website as we prepare this report. Imagine what would happen if Mexico put out a map that included the United States as part of its territory!

On October 26, 2011 President Abbas was photographed by the official PA daily news service holding up a stone model of a map of Palestine including all of Israel. Also in October, the PA

Ambassador to Brazil, Alzeben Ibrahim, stated to a group of university students that "Israel should disappear."

The PA website in the United Kingdom has the same logo. The following report was issued by the Press Association-UK: "The UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has banned the Palestinian Diplomatic Mission to the UK from using a "misleading" interactive map on its website that featured the whole of Israel in the red, green and black colors of the Palestinian flag. The ASA said: "We concluded that the website was misleading and breached our code of advertising practice."

On November 26, 2011, the PA Ambassador to India, Adli Sadeq, told the official PA daily Al-Hayat Al-Jadida that: "The Israelis ...fool themselves (in) assuming that Fatah accepts them and recognizes the right of their state to exist, and it is Hamas alone that loathes them and does not recognize the right of this state to exist. They ignore the fact that this state, based on a fabricated (Zionist) enterprise, never had any shred of a right to exist."

These facts sharply contradict the depiction of current circumstances we frequently hear from BDS advocates. Ignoring the recent history in Gaza, they draw a straight line from unilateral removal of Israeli security forces from in and around the Palestinian territories to peace in the region. The Gaza experience and statements by leaders of the Palestinian people suggest that "ending the occupation" would not lead to peace. In fact, intensifying international pressure against Israel alone would be counterproductive. It could lead to groups openly committed to the destruction of Israel being in a stronger position. This would certainly not benefit the Palestinians who seek peaceful coexistence, nor move the cause of Palestinian statehood forward. It would in fact expose Palestinians to yet more violence, as they would be inevitably caught in the middle of intra-Palestinian conflict.

If the Presbyterian Church stands with BDS we are embracing a depiction of circumstances that is not supported by facts. Indeed, it is a narrative that ignores important recent history. If we embrace BDS, we are telling the people of Israel that we are indifferent to their security and safety. Just as important, we are not acting as advocates for the Palestinian people, who stand to benefit most from an end to the conflict.

### **The Apartheid charge**

The 2012 Presbyterian General Assembly will be petitioned through an overture to approve the following statement: "**The 220th (2012) General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes that Israel's laws, policies, and practices constitute apartheid against the Palestinian people**". We believe this overture should be rejected. It would be an egregious charge against any nation. In the over-heated Middle East situation, it is extremely inflammatory. The church should be, if anything, a voice of reason. In opposing the overture, our reasoning follows.

### **The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is about two national movements: Israeli and Palestinian**

While the United Nations has defined the term apartheid, it did so in relation to the apartheid regime in South Africa. Therefore, the use of the term "apartheid" in the overture is based on an argument that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict bears direct comparison to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is depicted as a civil rights campaign, with Israel the oppressor and the Palestinians oppressed people seeking civil rights.

Black South Africans sought the rights they deserved as citizens of South Africa, just as African-Americans, during the days of the civil rights movement in the US, campaigned for the rights they deserved as citizens of the United States. The Palestinian movement, however, is about establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state. The overwhelming majority of Palestinians are not seeking citizenship in Israel. Statehood is what Palestinians are after.

The South African situation was, in effect, an internal battle within one nation. The Israel-Palestinian situation is a conflict between two nations (one recognized as a nation; one seeking recognition as a nation). In the South African situation, the outcome was one nation. In the Israel-Palestinian situation, the desired outcome is two separate nations. Therefore, the apartheid analogy does not hold for Israel.

### **Palestinians are subject primarily to Palestinian, not Israeli, laws, policies and practices**

The overture and its rationale state that Palestinians are subject to the laws, policies, and practices of the State of Israel. Nowhere in the 17-page, single-spaced rationale to this overture is the existence of the Palestinian Authority acknowledged, nor is the Islamist group Hamas mentioned. Palestinians are governed by Palestinians in Gaza and most of the West Bank. In the Gaza Strip, encompassing 40% of the Palestinian population, Palestinians are governed by the Islamist militant group Hamas. In the West Bank, Palestinians are governed by the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip are subject to the laws, policies and practices of Hamas. There are no Israeli troops in Gaza imposing anything on the population. Israel removed all Jewish settlements, and all Israeli military personnel, from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Gaza has been governed by Hamas since 2007 following a short civil war with Palestinian Authority security forces. Strict Sharia law is the foundation of law in Gaza and Hamas oversees the police force and the courts.

Hamas is publicly committed to the destruction of Israel and envisions a Palestinian state “from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea”. Hamas rejects the “two-state solution”, and considers itself in a state of war with Israel. Palestinians live under conditions that reflect this, with Israel imposing a partial, external military blockade on Gaza and controlling, as best it can, the flow of materials and weapons into Gaza. Living in a state of siege creates hardship for the people of Gaza, but this is the clear choice of the leaders of Hamas. There is no “apartheid” in Gaza.

Most Palestinians in the West Bank are governed by the Palestinian Authority and subject to the laws, police force, and courts of the Palestinian Authority, not Israel. Israeli leaders have acknowledged that large numbers of Jewish settlements will reside in the new state of Palestine once a permanent peace, and permanent borders, are established. The majority of Jewish West Bank settlers reside in communities adjacent to Jerusalem, and both parties acknowledge the reasonableness of establishing borders that accommodate the will of these residents to be a part of Israel. These border modifications would not impair the viability of the future state of Palestine. Such a plan was offered to Palestinians during the Clinton administration, and in 2007, and was rejected by Palestinian leadership both times.

Why were these proposals rejected? They were rejected because the Palestinian people are sharply divided on peace with Israel and the idea of two states coexisting peacefully. All want a Palestinian state, but Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups seek a Palestinian state that annexes all of Israel into one Palestinian state. Under their plan, Israel ceases to exist.

### **Arab-Israelis in the State of Israel**

Arab citizens of Israel are most accurately described, and view themselves, as Arab-Israelis, not Palestinians as the overture rationale states. Israel is a liberal democracy. Arab-Israelis who live in Israel proper are citizens of Israel and enjoy freedoms of press, assembly, and worship, freedoms not experienced by many in Gaza. In Israel, Arabs can and do serve in the Knesset, Israel's Foreign Service, and on the Israeli Supreme Court. Arabs have the right to vote for their representatives. There are several Arab members of the Israeli Knesset, many of whom openly oppose Israeli policies. In Israel, Arabs receive medical care in hospitals alongside Jews.

Is it fair to say that Arab-Israelis, as a group, do not experience all the economic prosperity many non-Arab Israelis do have? A reasonable case can be constructed for that position. However, the same argument can be made about African Americans or Hispanic Americans in the United States. Reasonable arguments can be made that these two racial/ethnic groups do not share all the benefits of American society. However, the United States is not an apartheid nation and neither is Israel. Israel, like the United States, is a nation where there is much work to be done to insure that all of its citizens have equal opportunities. The church should be working to create greater opportunities, not using divisive rhetorical terms such as apartheid to drive people further apart.

### **On Standing in Solidarity with Palestinian Christians**

As Presbyterians, we must adhere to Christian peacemaking principles. We believe that advancing peace through the two-state solution is the way to accomplish this, not the path of the BDS movement.

In 2009 a group of Palestinian Christians drafted a document known as "Kairos Palestine." In 2010, at the General Assembly of PCUSA in Minneapolis, an effort was made by some people to have our Church adopt the Kairos document as an authoritative position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That effort was defeated. Instead, those assembled recommended for study a few important elements of the Kairos document they found helpful: hopes of freedom for the Palestinian people, calls for nonviolence, love of one's enemies, and reconciliation.

The Kairos Palestine document embraced BDS with its call for boycott and divestment. It declared that the "occupation was a sin" and that Israel must "end the occupation". Ignoring the Gaza experience, it claimed that peace would occur without the occupation. It charged Israel with being an apartheid state.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex. The Presbyterian Church resolved in 2008 that we should not reduce either party to caricatures of good and evil. That is what the apartheid misrepresentation does. Israelis are striving to build a fair and decent society. So are Palestinians. While there are rejectionists in each camp, we as Christians must remain advocates for reconciliation. Therefore, we must reject the inflammatory language of documents such as Kairos Palestine.

The Presbyterian Church cannot stand in solidarity with those Palestinian Christians who urge support for divisive BDS tactics, who declare Israel to be an "apartheid" nation, and attempt to delegitimize Israel as a nation-state. However, we can urge our government and the international community to assist Palestinians in building a peaceful, democratic state with a commitment to human rights. Hamas must be disarmed and rejected by the Palestinian people. A free press must be established. Palestinian peace advocates must be able to speak freely without being labeled "collaborators" and threatened with violence and death. The Palestinian elections that have been called for in 2012, must be genuinely free.

### **Summary**

According to the most recent polling available, 74% of Presbyterians believe that our peacemaking strategy in the Middle East should include the U.S. "maintaining the close diplomatic and military relationship with Israel;" 51% oppose further expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank or East Jerusalem; a strong 65% support a two state solution; only 35% oppose the construction of the barrier between Israel and Palestine with 46% having no opinion on or neither support or oppose the barrier.

This polling data supports the position of Presbyterians for Middle East Peace that PCUSA efforts should be directed at peacemaking, not intensifying confrontation. A peacemaker works to soften

the hearts of those trapped in conflict. To do this, a peacemaker must be respected by both parties, be able to speak truth to both sides and be able to work effectively and productively with all people of good will. Sadly, too much of what has been put before past general assemblies has eroded the ability of the PC(USA) to be seen as a fair and open mediator/peacemaker. We cannot afford to exacerbate the current situation by creating additional conflict issues.

In support of a peacemaking role, in 2008, the General Assembly adopted an overture calling for the PCUSA to “Be a voice for the victims of violence in both Israel and Palestine. We ask PC(USA) members, congregations, committees, and other entities to become nonpartisan advocates for peace. As such, we will not over-identify with the realities of the Israelis or Palestinians. Instead we will identify with the need for peacemaking voices in the midst of horrific acts of violence and terror.”

The General Assembly in 2010 continued to seek out an authentic mediating role for the PCUSA. A controversial report from The Middle East Study Committee was altered in significant ways to make it less partisan. A call to embrace Kairos Palestine was also not approved. Advocates from all sides of the Middle East issues began a respectful dialogue that continues to this day. In this dialogue, differences of opinion have not magically disappeared; and, some individuals and groups have continued to make highly politicized statements. However, people are talking to one another in ways that indicate a new willingness to listen to different views.

As we approach the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly this summer, we sincerely hope and pray that our church stays on this path, and sends a clear and consistent message. This can be accomplished if the GA:

*Formally acknowledges and recognizes the rights, aspirations, and obligations of both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples*

*Reaffirms the justice and political importance of the two state solution*

*Rejects the proposal from MRTI to encourage divestment from Caterpillar Tractor, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola Solutions because they provide products and services to Israel*

*Directs MRTI to cease engagement with companies intended to pressure such companies to engage in a boycott of Israel*

*Rejects all overtures seeking declaration of Israel as an “apartheid state”*

*Continues to reject requests to broadly endorse documents promoting BDS (boycott/Divestment/Sanction)*

If we do these things, we are peacemakers, and we can make a difference.