

## Reject the “Apartheid” Overture

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. 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 2008, 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 most 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 have served 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.

### **Three Questions for Consideration**

If your support for this overture has been solicited, three simple questions must be asked:

*Is this overture based on truth or half-truths?*

*Is it just?*

*Will it advance the cause of peace?*

A half-truth presented with the intent of misleading a well-intentioned reader is not a truth. The word for this is *propaganda*. An example of *propaganda* is a statement on page 10 of the overture rationale:

*Israel's laws, policies, and practices systematically prevent Palestinians from freedom of residence through denial of housing permits and the demolition of Palestinian housing.*

Not mentioned is the fact that in the twelve months through October 2011, West Bank Palestinians completed 33,822 dwelling units, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). By comparison, Israel completed 33,128 units in 2010, according to the Israel

Central Bureau of Statistics. PCBS projects that by the end of 2011, the number of housing units in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is expected to reach a total of 884,385, an increase of about 26 percent compared with 2007 ( <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article510248.ece?comments=all> ). Sadly, the rationale for this overture is inundated with half-truths of this nature.

Is the overture *just*? The position of Presbyterians for Middle East Peace is that the rights, aspirations, and obligations of both peoples, Israeli and Palestinian, must be respected. This overture soundly fails this test. It labels Israel an apartheid state, an accusation not backed by truth, and portrays Palestinians as innocent victims. The Palestinian group Hamas is never even mentioned in the overture. This is *unjust*.

Finally, will this overture *advance the cause of peace*? We believe it will not. The intent of this overture is to put pressure on Israel to withdraw, unilaterally, Israeli security forces from the West Bank. Israel has already tried this with the policy of “disengagement” and unilaterally withdrew from Gaza. The outcome was tragic for all involved. The path to peace requires commitment from both parties, not one.

This overture raises a fundamental question for the PCUSA. Do we want to be part of the solution or part of the problem? We should not engage in verbal warfare. Instead, we should seek a truly open dialogue based on full and complete facts. We want to be Christian peacemakers. Let us speak words of love and justice; not words that demean and divide.