



PRESBYTERIANS *for*  
MIDDLE EAST PEACE



**A Response and Rebuttal to the ACSWP Report**  
*Israel-Palestine: For Human Values*  
*in the Absence of a Just Peace*

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## Introduction

The Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy has recently released a copy of its report, *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace*. The Report was the result of a task force created at the request of the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly (2014). Many Presbyterians were hoping that the report might help further the cause of peace in the Holy Land and provide for positive steps for the denomination. At one time PCUSA was noted for its intellectual rigor and spiritual zeal, but this report has dashed that image. What we find instead is a continuation of failed research, faulty theology and political agendas that are reminiscent of *Zionism Unsettled* and repeatedly seen in the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, which has produced this document. Instead of providing for hope, this document will further the divide not just between PCUSA and the Jewish community but between Israelis and Palestinians. While the document speaks of reconciliation, the actions recommended will not bring about reconciliation but will lead to further hardening of positions in the status quo.

In its basic assumption of attempting to backtrack the denomination's historic support for a Two State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the report does not represent a majority of the denomination's membership, but more importantly, does not represent the opinion of the vast majority of Israelis and a strong majority of Palestinians who both support Two States.<sup>1</sup> If we are supporting the right of Palestinians to self-determination, it seems odd that our action points would not seek to provide a state for them to pursue that self-determination. The state of affairs in both Israel and Palestine over the past several years has diminished the political will of either side to pursue Two States. Yet, this does not mean that the PCUSA should disavow it as a goal. Emboldened by Christ, we should seek to bring new life to the aspirations of a lasting peace in which Israel and Palestine stand side by side in the Holy Land. We should instead embolden the majority of the people of the region by supporting their dreams.

The ACSWP Report is written in a way that causes the reader to immediately question the agenda being promoted within it. It makes no attempt at being a balanced and intellectually rigorous study. It makes biased arguments, based on historically-inaccurate claims, often takes opinion as fact, repeats similar arguments, over and over, to reinforce them as "fact," and demonizes Israel by placing almost all responsibility for the conflict on it, while failing to acknowledge that the conflict has two sides, and the Palestinian culpability as well. In many ways, none of this is surprising. It is reminiscent of the arguments made by BDS proponents in the Church over and over.

A good example of the bias in the report is the repeated use of the language "Zionist Judaism." This term is not defined but is used in a derogatory way. It explicitly rejects Zionism, the concept that the Jewish people have the right of self-determination, and which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The usage of Zionist Judaism implies that Judaism itself is bad. The language chosen distorts the understanding of Zionism, as the authors of the report would leave us to believe that there were no Jews in the Holy land prior to the 1880s. It is historically inaccurate, and seems to take its lead from the Arab League's arguments repeatedly made since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Much of the same terminology was used in the discredited "study guide" *Zionism Unsettled*, issued by the Israel-Palestine Mission Network in 2014, and which the denomination declared in the last General Assembly (2014) to not represent the views of the Presbyterian Church. Yet, the ACSWP Report reads as if it is out of the same play-book. It ignores the views of the General Assembly, which did more than declare that *Zionism Unsettled* did not represent the views of the Church, but also explicitly stated that its position on divestment did not imply support of the BDS

Movement, and instead repudiated such associations. Yet, publications of the BDS movement frequently use language such as Zionist Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

After reading the ACSWP Report, it is not hard to see what the underlying agenda is behind it. It draws almost exclusively on the same sources used over and over by the BDS Movement. It demonizes Israel, while treating the Palestinians as all innocents. It tries to play to Christian sympathies, by suggesting that because of the actions of Israel, the number of Palestinian Christians is dwindling, without any evidence to support such an assertion. It should be noted that even the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has noted that the Christian community has recently shown an increase.<sup>3</sup> Do we as a denomination want to truly study the facts in an honest and open arena or will we tolerate biased documents that are unsupported by numbers but supported by the BDS movement, which is dedicated to the destruction of Israel itself?

## **Intellectual Rigor**

The report's lack of intellectual rigor becomes clear from the very beginning. The report's authors seem to conflate human concepts with that of God's Law. One of these concepts is self-determination. The report argues that the present status quo nullifies the self-determination of the Palestinians, which they have pursued through peaceful processes. In focusing on Palestinian self-determination, the report intentionally ignores the right of Jews to a nation. The right of both peoples –Palestinians and Jews—to a nation in which they can pursue their own dreams and vision is clearly the desire of the world community and most of the membership of the PCUSA. However, this document fails to recognize this desire and does not even speak to the right of Jews to self-determination.

The report regularly treats opinions as facts. For example, on page 2, it accepts the New York Times editorialist Thomas Friedman's opinion that the door is closing on a two state solution as fact. While Tom Friedman is an accomplished author, he is ultimately an op-ed columnist, and the report demonstrates its lack of intellectual rigor by accepting his opinions as fact, without any supporting evidence. His opinion does not constitute "many analysts."

The report states that the denomination should not try to impose a specific solution on Israelis or Palestinians, although the PCUSA has never hesitated to make such statements in the past. Nowhere in the report is an actual analysis of the benefits of a Two State solution offered, or of One State either. Yet, by seemingly being open to either option, by endorsing this report, the denomination would be taking a dramatic step back from its historic and firm support of Two States. In effect this would be telling the Jewish community that we no longer stand by Two States, without offering any explanation of why we do not support Two States. Furthermore, if the General Assembly were to endorse the report, as it is asked to do, the BDS Movement would spin this action as a victory toward One State. The BDS Movement would say that since PCUSA no longer stands by Two States, they are beginning to open up to a One State Solution, much in the same way they took our narrow vote of divestment as a firm vote of support for the BDS agenda.

So if we do not stand by our support for Two States then people may believe we support only One State, and simple mathematics would suggest that if Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza were combined, there would be a Palestinian state, and one in which voices like Hamas would have considerable power, and Jews would be not only marginalized, but in danger of their own lives. While the Report does not go so far as to repeat the BDS meme "Palestine will be Free from the River to the Sea," the reality is the arguments that the Report makes support just that outcome. Ironically, this is the outcome desired by the US-government designated terrorist

group Hamas (which oppressively rules over the Gaza strip), whose very charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish State of Israel. Israeli Jews will lose their right to self-determination. That the denomination would consider self-determination for Palestinians to take precedence over self-determination for Israeli-Jews as well is unacceptable. It is unchristian.

## **Historical Errors and Intentional Distortions**

The integrity of the report itself is undermined by the blatant errors in history as well as a whitewashing of facts to pursue a narrow agenda. There is perhaps no greater example than the report's description of the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising) as largely non-violent. This in effect treats the Palestinian resistance as on the same moral level of the American civil rights movement, in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference promoted non-violent ways to accomplish voting and civil rights to end legal segregation. Yet, the First Intifada (1987-1991) included far more than boycotts of Israelis by Palestinians. It consisted of widespread throwing of stones and Molotov Cocktails and assaults on Israeli citizens. It is estimated that over 1100 Palestinians and 200 Israelis were killed.<sup>4</sup> While the First Intifada was far less violent than the second one that began in September 2000, the report's language is highly deceptive in portraying the conflict as entirely one-sided. Palestinians are routinely treated as victim, seeking justice, and Israel is the aggressor. In making this observation we do not seek to hold the state of Israel innocent for actions leading up to and including the First Intifada, but do question the nature of this document. Are we seeking the truth, or are we seeking to pursue a political agenda? Are we interested in pursuing the difficult job of peacemaking or are we just interested in feeling better about ourselves to the exclusion of others?

## **The British Mandate**

The report includes other distortions of facts that are simply inaccurate. It claims that Israel received 78 percent of the British Mandate (the area in the Middle East controlled by Great Britain until after World War II). The British Mandate includes what is today Israel, the West Bank, and all of Jordan. To claim that Israel was given 78 percent of the British Mandate is completely inaccurate. It is a historical fallacy that is frequently used by the BDS movement and its allies to attempt to paint Israel in the worst possible light and as an aggressor. In addition, the report does not mention that a major step in obtaining the Oslo Accords in 1993 was Israel's willingness to recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), even though the PLO had only pursued a policy of bloodshed to pursue its political agenda to that date. It ignores the fact that Israel exchanged land for peace (the Sinai Peninsula) to make peace with Egypt in the Camp David Accords. Instead, it demonizes Israel and any report that seeks to demonize one party and to alleviate another, must be questioned and held to the light of the truth.

The Report uses deceptive language in a way that is beguiling. It is understandable that the authors refer to the region as Israel-Palestine, as it holds out hope for Two States, yet that is not why they choose to use it. The authors claim that the State of Israel has "subsumed" the State of Palestine, which again is historically not accurate. There has never been a State of Palestine, even though it has been proposed on a number of instances and accepted by Israel and each time, subverted by the failure of negotiations by the Palestinian leadership.<sup>5</sup> The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza originally came about after the Six Day War in 1967 through a defensive action by the State of Israel facing aggression by the combined armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Israel had pleaded with Jordan to not enter the war on the side of Egypt and Syria.<sup>6</sup> The defeat of Jordan and the capture of the land so caught off guard the government of Israel that they had to scramble to administer it. But the West Bank was not "conquered" by Israel, which did not ask for the war. It was not the aggressor.

Prior to the Six Day war, the Palestinian West Bank was part of Jordan and not an independent state. Before 1948 it was part of the British Mandate, and before World War I, had been for centuries part of the Ottoman Empire. There never was an independent Palestinian State. Indeed Jordan never proposed creating one after 1948. Until the Oslo Accords in 1993, there had never even been a realistic prospect of an independent State of Palestine as the Arab world had never accepted the 1947 UN Partition proposal. The Oslo Agreement was to be an initial agreement with the thought that in five years, after continued negotiations, could lead to a final agreement. However, the Palestinian Authority's own corruption and inability to govern, as well as hostile Israeli politicians, fueled by the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, created a dynamic that failed to build upon this success. The entrenchments of the present divisions within the West Bank are a demonstration of the failure of both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

## **The Oslo Accords**

The Report argues that Israel has failed to live up to the requirements of the Oslo Accords, but it inaccurately describes the details of the accords. For example, ACSWP claims that East Jerusalem was supposed to be the capitol of a future Palestine, when in fact, the entire city of Jerusalem was listed in the Accords as something to be determined by both parties at a later date. This is not surprising given the historically inaccurate way in which the report considers Jerusalem. Indeed, it was not until 2000, when President Clinton proposed a resolution to the status of Jerusalem, and then Yasser Arafat rejected it, and walked away from the peace process, leading to the Second Intifada.

The report argues that there were several issues in the Oslo Accord that were to be addressed through negotiations that could not be completed by 1993. These include not only Jerusalem, but also refugees, settlements, security, borders, relations with bordering countries, and issues of common interest. In noting that these items still need to be negotiated, they then blame Israel for the fact that negotiations have not turned out well, and claims that it has not lived up to its obligations on issues such as borders or settlements. The one-sided analysis always blames Israel, and never places any responsibility on the Palestinian Authority. The conflict is complex, and two sided, but the report continually treats Israel as the sole aggressor.

The Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into three zones, Areas A, B, and C. Area A is under full civil and security control of the Palestinian authority. Area B is under Palestinian civil control, but joint Israeli-Palestinian security control, while Area C is under full Israeli civil and security control. In certain instances the IDF has moved into areas of A and B for security purposes, more often than not, with the involvement of the Palestinian Security apparatus. As a matter of fact, one of the byproducts of the Oslo Agreement has been the coordination between the IDF and the PA security service. So successful has this agreement been to the security of both Israelis and Palestinians, that even in the height of tension between Netanyahu and Abbas, Abbas has been loathe to end cooperation on security matters.<sup>7</sup> So the description of the authors does not tell the full story.

## **Jerusalem**

The status of Jerusalem is another issue in which the Report makes both flawed historical arguments and intentional distortions. The Report implies that West Jerusalem under Israel's control before 1967 was accessible to all religious groups as was East Jerusalem while under Jordanian control. However, that is not historically true. Under Jordanian control, East Jerusalem and the Jewish Holy Sites were closed to Israelis before 1967. The implication in the report's assessment is that Jerusalem was an open city before 1967 but

since 1967 has been slowly closed off to non-Israelis. This is simply not true. To this day, there is free passage, without any checkpoints for Palestinian East Jerusalemites to go as they please in Jerusalem, or Israel itself.

The report also leads the reader to believe that Palestinian residents of Jerusalem had their citizenship revoked when instead it was the desire of these Palestinians not to become citizens so that Israel came up with a new system. All this was done to protect the right of a future state of Palestine and for these residents of Jerusalem to become citizens of this state. But instead the authors attempt to tell the reader that this was Israel's attempt to disenfranchise Palestinians.

## **Refugees**

The report's discussion of refugees is particularly troublesome. The United Nations Resolution 194 on Refugees stated that refugees have the right to return to their homes, or receive compensation. But the Report (along with BDS proponents) argue that this includes not only those who left their homes in 1948, but all of their descendants. The resolution was never intended to apply to descendants, so to claim that 8 million Palestinians are awaiting the right of return is blatantly false and without merit.<sup>8</sup> This argument is ultimately part of the BDS effort to undermine the Jewish state. If 8 million Palestinian "refugees" were to return to what is today Israel, there would no longer be a Jewish state. It is part of the effort to delegitimize Israel itself. This is similar to typical BDS slogans like "Palestine will be free from the river to the sea," which implies that a free Palestine will extend from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, encompassing all of the State of Israel.

## **Settlements**

The report argues that the issue of Jewish settlements on the West Bank is one of the reasons that peace has not been obtained. But it distorts this issue too. It fails to acknowledge that both sides have agreed to land-swaps, so that the bulk of settlements that are adjacent to the Green Line (the Gush Etzion bloc, for example) would remain in Israel, and Palestine would be given other adjacent lands, on the other side of the border. Settlements not along the border would become part of Palestine, and Jews living there would have to make a choice of living within a Palestinian state, or returning to Israel. There is no doubt that the settlement issue is contentious. But the report is disingenuous in how it treats the issue. To insinuate that Israel is seeking to take the land by having more and more settlers move into, ignore the reality that Israel has, by force, removed settlers from territory when it is returned after concluding treaties, such as Camp David, or when it is deemed in Israel's best interest, such as Gaza. However, what is not up for debate is that the PA has not expressed any interest in allowing Jews to remain in Palestine after its founding, even though many Jews lived in those lands prior to the conflict.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that the presence of Israeli settlements makes the reality of Two States more of a challenge, it by no means make it a non-starter. With the vast majority of settlements located in lands adjacent to 1967 borders, a negotiated settlement can certainly be accomplished.

## **Gaza**

Gaza is by far the most complicated factor here, because Israel unilaterally withdrew from the region and turned it over to the PA. Almost immediately afterwards, a civil war erupted between Hamas and Fatah with Hamas winning, and began what has been an ongoing human rights disaster caused not by Israel, but by Hamas itself. Hamas has been violently opposed to any Jewish presence in the region and denies the existence of Israel. Its governing charter calls for the destruction of the Israeli state. It has frequently launched attacks against Israel, which then causes a response. It is a tragic existence for the people of Gaza as they suffer under

the rule of those who do not seek coexistence. Hamas terrorizes its own people, and uses extremist militant Islamic messages to teach its children to hate Jews. It launches terror attacks within Israel whenever it can, including the March 2016 bus bombing in Jerusalem. While it is true that Israel controls much of what is around Gaza, to blame Gaza's tragic reality on Israel ignores the real culprit, Hamas. The fact that the PA cannot work with Hamas demonstrates the real issue here. Yet, BDS proponents fail to acknowledge this, and treat Hamas as victims. It is not surprising that the same organizations that have funded Hamas, fund the BDS Movement.

## **Double Standards**

The report presents misconceptions as fact and applies double standards throughout. Early in the report, it points out on page two that the present Israeli cabinet is not supportive of Two States nor is the Yesha Council of Settlers, which represents less than 10% of the Israeli population. What the report does not mention is that Hamas, who hold the majority of the democratically elected Palestinian Legislature does not support Two States either. <sup>10</sup>So if the denomination endorses this report, which opens the door to a One State reality, in essence this makes the PCUSA an ally with Hamas, which is probably not the bridge building that Presbyterians really want to associate with.

The report applies two different standards, particularly when it comes to violence between Israelis and Palestinians. The report treats attacks on Israeli civilians as armed resistance, when they are really acts of terrorism, no different from the larger-scale Paris and Brussels suicide bombings. International law does provide an occupied people the right to resist, but it also condemns any actions against non-combatants, and actions against innocent civilians are considered to be acts of terrorism.<sup>11</sup> As such, the knife attacks on innocent Israeli civilians during the recent "knife intifada" are not acts of armed resistance, but are nothing less than acts of terrorism. This double standard is seen in other places in this document, such as the issue of borders and maps. The authors point out that the Ministry of Tourism of the State of Israel produces maps that are not very accurate regarding PA-controlled territory. But the authors fail to point out that Palestinian Authority maps rarely show the State of Israel, if at all.<sup>12</sup> The way to address a wrong is not to create another wrong; it is to speak for truth. Yet, the ACSWP is more interested in promoting its BDS-agenda.

This sort of double standard calls into question the authors' call for the denomination to act with integrity and effectiveness, when its recent actions demonstrate neither, this report included. How can we claim integrity when we cannot get simple historic facts right? Or how can we act with integrity and effectiveness when we advocate for divestment, knowing that the church bodies holding funds will not divest nor when that divestment either does not exist to begin with or is so minor as to not change the dynamic? Those are actions devoid of integrity and effectiveness; they are actions of expediency and political posturing, which are certainly not Christian values. The Church's divestment debate promoted by BDS supporters is purely symbolic politics, with no real impact on anything, except support for the BDS Movement and fostering an increasing toxic environment instead of bringing the parties together. It is disingenuous at best, and dishonest at worst.

## **Questionable Theological Arguments**

Instead of seeking to reflect upon the historical standards of theology found in the Reformed Movement, the Report instead creates "Presbyterian Values." If we are using these values to guide our actions as a denomination, then perhaps more time needs to be spent fleshing them out. On page 3, some values are lifted up as being "Reformed", but are they? A search of the Confessions and Holy Scripture does not find an

expression of the right of self-determination, an idea that was not given meaning until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Furthermore, if we do lift this up as a Presbyterian value, does this mean we need to support the Russian separatists in the Ukraine or the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey? More references are made in this section to values of the United Nations than to the Word of God. As a denomination, do we service human institutions or do we serve God?

At the outset, it is difficult to proceed in a conversation of Christian values or Presbyterian values, when these values have not been highlighted, agreed to or defined previously. This is one of the reasons that value based decision-making is a process fraught with perils: whose values, when are they applied, etc. If the framework of this report is values, whose values were they? The authors? The General Assembly's? The denomination's?

As a denomination, we cannot support a document based upon Presbyterian values if we have not defined those values and already agreed to them. Are these the values of the denomination or a small-unelected group desiring to pursue their own agenda? If they are the values of the denomination, then should they not be applied across the board and advise all our decisions?

### **Dignity of All Persons**

In expressing the Christian value of "Dignity of All Persons," language gets the report's authors into trouble. Speaking of "tribal loyalties" with reference to Jews is code language used in the past and present to question the loyalty and fealty of the Jewish people in the states they reside. It implies dual loyalty and the existence of a "nefarious" plan.<sup>13</sup> How the authors can claim a dignity for all people while at the same time resorting to such anti-Semitic language begs the question, are these the values they have in mind for PCUSA? The use of anti-Semitic language reveals in no uncertain terms the underlying roots of the BDS Movement, and should be an affront to all Presbyterians. And if these are the values of the authors, then the denomination must reject this report out of hand.

We can agree that the dignity of all persons must be held as sacred, with no exceptions. We must urge the government of Israel to pursue policies that are just and humane. We must also hold the Palestinians responsible for their own actions that have led to the deterioration of their status and condition. The blockade of Gaza is an example of Palestinian action that was the impetus for creating a challenging situation. In 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza, in an effort to move the peace process forward. This significant step towards peace, and Palestinian self-determination was met with violence against Israel, and against the people of Gaza itself. The blockade was only instituted after Hamas' bloody takeover of Gaza and after they begin smuggling arms, ammunition and other military supplies into Gaza to threaten Israeli neighbors. In fact millions of Israeli civilians have endured thousands of Hamas rockets raining down on them for years. While the blockade has prevented some building supplies to enter into Gaza, supplies that have been used to build tunnels, the reality is that the blockade is a function of Hamas' violence, not Israel's. We must also refrain from making erroneous statements such as Israel stripping citizenship from Palestinians, which is not true and only inflames the situation.

We also believe that the PCUSA must work with ecumenical and interfaith partners to create a broad coalition to strengthen our witness in the region. Yet our actions to date have been anything but, as our past actions have alienated 95 percent of the Jewish community in the United States. Furthermore, our actions have found us alone among mainline denominations as we have become more and more aligned with BDS movement, which the ELCA, UMC and Episcopal Churches have rejected.



## **Self-Determination of Peoples**

The second value lifted up, the “Self-Determination of Peoples,” is not a Christian nor Presbyterian value, it is an important political theory of democracy but it is not an absolute. For instance, do we as Christians support the right of the Russian separatists to withdrawal from the Ukraine, or the Basques in Spain? Furthermore, the scripture passages used to support this concept refers to the relationship between God and humanity but do not refer to political philosophy. It would seem that the authors desire to elevate a human value to that of God’s, which is always a perilous choice.

We also agree with the understanding that only through a negotiated peace settlement by democratically elected representatives can we truly find peace. We must encourage democratic reforms within the Palestinian government so that the will of the people is heard. Furthermore, we must lift up those seeking peace and refrain from an outside solution enforced by the US, UN or other bodies that is not negotiated by the Israelis and Palestinians themselves. Such a forced settlement will not lead to peace but just a continuation of conflict and violence.

## **For Building Community**

We must note with approval the use of reconciliation, the example of Jesus Christ to bridge the divide between God and humanity. The way to peace in Israel and Palestine is reconciliation, those steps that bring down barriers and walls; physical, emotional and spiritual walls. Israel is like any other nation. The United States is certainly struggling with the integration of minority communities as equal members of society. Israel has taken great pains to integrate Palestinians into the national fabric and the work of the 80 member organizations that are part of the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) demonstrate the desire of the two communities to build a shared society. Just as America struggles with the relationship of the dominant culture with Latino, Asian and African American communities, so does Israel struggle.

The authors fail to recognize this dynamic and also seem to seek to confuse the reader. Yes, work needs to be done to bring full equality to Palestinian citizens of Israel but care needs to be taken to distinguish their situation with that of Palestinian residents of the occupied territories. Yes, they should be afforded full universal rights, but if Israel grants them citizenship, then the dream of a Palestinian state is over. Moreover, there is no evidence that West Bank Palestinians want Israeli citizenship. And it is impossible to tell what Palestinians in the Gaza strip want, as their voices are suppressed by the terror of their own Hamas regime. Since the authors advocate for citizenship being offered to the Palestinians of the West Bank, it would seem that what the authors want is one state. Yet at no time in this document do they assess prospects for the viability of a One State Solution. Instead they only focus on the hurdles to Two States, which are many, but are certainly not insurmountable.

Christ’s work clearly is that of reconciliation, of bridging the divide between God and humanity and our work must likewise bridge gaps. Henceforth, any of our actions that seek to separate peoples or divide or create a form of dualism must be rejected. Efforts of coexistence must be pursued and supported and efforts to dehumanize and delegitimize must be condemned. We wholeheartedly support efforts of peaceful coexistence and encourage the denomination to review the fine work of organizations such as ALLMEP who, against all odds, are bringing Palestinians and Israelis together. It must be noted however, that the BDS movement opposes such work, and seeks to end coexistence programs through a process of anti-normalization.<sup>14</sup> The

PCUSA, if we are to be reconcilers, must denounce BDS and its attempts to segregate Israelis from Palestinians.

The bias of the authors is again shown in their failure to hold Palestinians accountable for their own human rights violations, which are many and numerous.<sup>15</sup> On page 8, they reference only Israel and other armed personnel. Why the fear to name the truth that Palestinians are committing human rights violations against their own people? If we as a denomination are going to speak the truth and bring about reconciliation, then we must see the totality of the brokenness that exists in the region. While the authors claim in the opening of the document a desire not to demonize one side over the other, they fail in this endeavor, time and again holding the Israelis to a different standard than Palestinians. In essence they continue to perpetuate the victim mentality.

While the authors highlight the work of the denomination to seek to bring about reconciliation in the Palestinian community, we must note the failure of these efforts as the PA and Hamas have not and will not set aside differences to present a viable peace partner in the process. While condemning the US as an unfair broker of peace, the authors have not demonstrated the failure of the Palestinians to create their own stable representation to negotiate with Israel. While we can acknowledge that the present government in Israel does not appear eager for negotiations, we certainly need to acknowledge that the Palestinian representatives seem no more ready for such negotiations either.

In the past the PCUSA has stood for integrity in its stance for the support of both Israelis and Palestinians. However, recent actions by the denomination have sought to define this conflict in Manicheistic terms of good and evil. Manicheism was an early heresy within the church that sought to define the world through a dualistic worldview, there was good and bad and a person was either or. However, within Christianity we recognized that because of sin a person could be both, as well as redeemed through Christ. The authors work seems to reflect this dualistic worldview, with Israelis filling the role of evil, and Palestinians as good. This form of Manicheism is a heresy today as it was in the past. This form of dualism rears its head on page 10 as the authors offer recommendations that certainly hold merit but then in the descriptions show the bias that the authors hold.

## **Equality Under the Law**

The fourth value, “Rule of Law,” again is fraught with peril. What law is being referred to here? As Christians seeking reconciliation, does this mean we must support such laws as the one passed in North Carolina discriminating against the transgender community, or efforts to infringe voting rights to suppress minority votes such as Voter ID legislation? Language, such as “we need laws to maintain order” are akin to the arguments that were used to suppress the Civil Rights Movement and have given rise to totalitarian regimes. It would seem that the authors have certain laws that they are referring to, and again seek to elevate them to a divine status, which borders on all sorts of charges of heresy and blasphemy.

The plight of children in the region is truly a tragedy, whether an Israeli child suffering from the anxiety of potential missile or terrorist attacks or a Palestinian child living in the West Bank who faces potential threats of incarceration or loss of home. Clearly there is much that the denomination can do to advocate for children. Yet, it is hard to truly advocate for children as a unified denomination when facts are blurred or lies are offered as truth.

The report implies that children are arrested and processed without any form of parental or legal representation. In reality, through an Israeli Security Directive, special courts are set up to protect the rights of minors, requiring an Arabic-speaking attorney be appointed to represent Palestinian children, and the courts strive to allow parents to be present during proceedings, and to be notified as soon as possible of a pending arrest. While improvements are needed, attempts have been made to protect children.

While any deficiencies in the military court system are the responsibilities of the State of Israel, the issue of children imprisonment is not solely Israel's responsibility. Recently, the noted Palestinian journalist Hafez Al-Barghouti was highly critical of the role of the PA and other Palestinian leaders who have encouraged children to join in attacks against Israeli civilians. He writes, "We must not bring our children into the cycle of violence." Another journalist Mohammed Daraghmeah urges the youth to take to the strikes and demonstrate and speak for rights but to not "rush to their deaths." Until the Palestinians stop encouraging their own children to pursue violence, this unfortunate situation will continue.<sup>16</sup>

We certainly support an understanding of equality under the law. Therefore, if we are to monitor aid given to Israel for its involvement with violations of human rights, then aid given to the PA must be held to the same standard. As the PA has been found guilty in US courts of incitement and terrorism, we must hold them accountable for acts of violence that the PA incites and encourages.<sup>17</sup>

### **Acknowledging Our Complicity**

The fifth value, the "Need to Confess," is ever present. Our need to continually examine our own actions and selves and to see how we have followed the Word is a truth we must adhere to. To recognize that even in our best efforts, sometimes we fail to follow God.

### **Solidarity with Suffering**

Finally the sixth value, that of "Solidarity with the Suffering," speaks to our need to not only recognize those that are suffering but also to lift people from that suffering, to destroy attempts to continue another's suffering. Together, these values are lifted up as the guiding principles for the report, but given what we have noted above, at least three of these values are questionable in actuality or practice. If half the values that form the bases of a report are found to be questionable, then the report itself cannot stand.

But let's look at how these values might come into play in the rest of the report, which immediately launches into an attack on Christian Zionism. While the report attacks Christian Zionism it fails to actually define the term. There are many Christians who support Israel and Palestine, but do not subscribe to certain perspectives offered by BDS who are labeled as Christian Zionists, while there are Christian Zionists who believe in the foundation of Israel as a stepping-stone to Christ's return. Frequently in this report the two get conflated into one. The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem defines Christian Zionism as those "Christians who believe that the Jews have a right to return to their ancestral homeland." Is this the definition that the authors are using?<sup>18</sup> Does this definition not live up to the right of self-determination of peoples? In labeling this Christian Zionism as a heresy, which PCUSA has not done, but Sabeel and BDS has, have we not condemned our own denomination to heresy? Now we can see that the definition of Christian Zionism that we have quoted does not match that which the report seems to mention. This is an indictment of the lack of research and integrity of the authors to define terms and be true to their own methodology. But again, this lack of integrity found in the reports speaks to its attempt demean Zionism itself and delegitimize Israel, which is widely seen as a form of anti-Semitism.<sup>19</sup>

But notice how the issue of values that are undefined can get the denomination into trouble. The report in page 17 asks the PCUSA to move beyond statements and to work with those groups that share “our values”. Which values are those because based upon the values of this report, the denomination could be forced to support Russian separatists in the Ukraine, groups that seek to subordinate all dissension in order to maintain “order” and those groups that still see Jews as a group with tribal allegiances. Are these Presbyterian Values?

It is troubling that instead of referring to scripture or the confessions, the authors first turn to secular traditions to speak about human rights. The Report quotes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as adopted by the UN as its standard, which makes no exemptions even pertaining to national security in abridging certain individual freedoms. But here is the weakness of human laws, while the UDHR sees no exemptions, Article 51 of the UN Charter does allow exemptions for national security. Human law is flawed, and not perfect, so a nation can always find a rationale to act in its national security. So why would the authors want to align themselves with human laws instead of God’s? Perhaps because if they are forced to deal with God’s laws, then they cannot pursue their own agenda. This is not an attempt to legitimize the right of Israel or the PA to use security as a pretext to deny human rights to individuals. Instead this is a demonstration of the faulty nature of human law. It is not consistent, and hard to apply across the board. As such, we in the Church seek to live by God’s law, which makes the standard of how we are to love all across the board. Which also means we must hold all those responsible accountable for their actions when human rights are violated and in this instance both Israelis and Palestinians. We can only find our actions justified when they are based upon the Word and the Confessional Standards.

It is clear that the authors, at best, have failed in their endeavor to create a value structure by which to address the issue of the conflict in Israel and Palestine, or at worst, are attempting to create a value structure that the denomination does not espouse to pursue their own agenda outside the biblical and confessional standard of the denomination.

The final note to be added about values is seen in the accusation leveled in the report that Israel is an apartheid state. To even hint that Israel is an apartheid state, demeans the situation that black Africans suffered in South Africa, and really begs the question of what are the values of the authors? Palestinians in the State of Israel have full citizenship and the rights of Israelis. They vote; they serve in Israel’s Parliament and its Supreme Court. They represent Israel in its foreign service. There is no comparison to South Africa. It is pure political propaganda.

The Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank do not have Israeli citizenship, nor do they want to become Israeli citizens. Presumably, they want a state of their own, which is what we want. This again is not apartheid. Kenneth Meshoe, a black South African who presently serves in the South African Parliament, argues that apartheid was a system that denied voting privileges, denied access to healthcare and education and fostered an image of racial superiority. While there are challenges to Palestinians residing in the West Bank, such as check points and the security barrier, Palestinians have access to the things that were denied Blacks under apartheid.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that the present structure is just, for it is not, but it is not apartheid. This is an opinion also held by Benjamin Pogrund, who as a young reporter befriended Nelson Mandela and reported on the Apartheid state. While he believes the occupation to be wrong and unjust he notes that the apartheid regime and apartheid policies at the core were racially motivated. These policies were created to dehumanize and degrade blacks in South Africa. He notes that this kind of racism is not present within the present structures in the West Bank.<sup>21</sup> This is language that demeans the denomination and clearly

shows the influence of the BDS movement in the writing of this report. There is no doubt that challenges exist in bring about two states but this form of demagoguery serves no one, but those seeking to delegitimize Israel.

## Substantive Policy Issues

### Security

Security is a controversial issue since unfortunately violence has been the preferred form of negotiation since Jews started arriving in a larger numbers in the 1920's. Violence in the region was not born out of the Israeli occupation, as violence has been part of the fabric in the region leading up to the war in 1948, as well as following the establishment of the State of Israel seen in continuing skirmishes on the borders from incursions from Gaza and the Jordanian controlled West Bank. They continued up until the War of 1967 and then they continued with the formation of the PLO. It is a sad fact that violence seems the preferred choice of diplomacy. The violence took another turn with the First and Second Intifadas, which lead to significant changes in the security apparatus of Israel, including the building of the security barrier. However, these changes are not the cause of violence, the cause of the violence is the conflict itself. Yet the report follows on such documents as *Zionism Unsettled* and the Kairos Document that state that the occupation is the cause of the violence. Only a negotiated settlement will bring it to an end.

Part of the changes in the security apparatus since the Second Intifada, a five-year period of extended terrorist activity, resulted in the establishment of security checkpoints, which has caused great inconvenience to the Palestinian community in the West Bank. However, these checkpoints were the response to extremist suicide bombers. There was a point in time in which there were no checkpoints and barriers in the West Bank under the Israel's military control and they came into existence because of real security concerns. Check points and the security barrier were an effort to stop suicide bombings across Israel. Would we expect the United States to do anything less if we were faced with such large scale and ongoing acts of terrorism?

One point of the Oslo agreement speaks to the need to maintain the security of Israel, which the authors attest to. However, the report places the blame of all security threats on the occupation itself and ignores the reality of threats that exist along its borders. Hezbollah is in Lebanon, ISIS and proxies of Iran are in Syria, ISIS is in the Sinai, the militant wing of the Palestinian Authority's ruling Fatah party are in the West Bank, and Hamas is in Gaza. Israelis, unfortunately, have become accustomed to a constant state of vigilance, but that does not mean that they do not face real threats to their existence.

And yes, the security of Palestinians must be addressed, for they are no less worthy than Israelis to live in security. But are we being honest about the security of Palestinians if we only take into account actions of Israel? What about the human rights violations of the Palestinian security forces, or militia within the West Bank? What about the violations of Hamas who torture and kill opponents and store weapons in schools and hospitals? As a church can we stand by and allow Palestinian aggressions against their own people to go unaddressed? Or should be turn a blind eye against Palestinian violence against Palestinians simply because it is inconsistent with some pre-determined narrative?

It is also of interest that the years chosen by the Report to view the number of Palestinians killed coincides with the latest bloodshed between Hamas and Israel where Hamas encourages the death of innocent Palestinians by using them as human shields in order to win the public relations battle with Israel. Do we as a

Church speak for those innocents, perhaps unintentionally killed by Israeli arms and munitions but sentenced to death by Hamas' actions?

It is disturbing to find a Body of Christ offering legitimacy for such violence. If we are truly speaking of the Peace of Christ, we cannot accept any form of violence, not from Israelis or Palestinians. With the authors' loose interpretation of international law, many oppressed groups within the United States might feel affirmed if they were to take up arms against their oppressors.

## **Water**

The issue of water is one of life and health. Concerns over access to water provides a means to demonstrate how Israelis and Palestinians can live and work side by side as nations. Yet much work needs to be done to get to this point. While many challenges exist, the report, once again, oversteps in attempting to portray Israel as an aggressor unfairly controlling the water market. Again, the report promotes a BDS-driven political agenda, rather than the truth.

Under the Oslo agreements, Israel and the Palestinian Authority agreed to the usage of the aquifers. It was recognized that the majority of the aquifer resides in Israel (8900 km<sup>2</sup>), with the remainder located in the West Bank (5600 km<sup>2</sup>). The agreement reached in 1995 was to be temporary and needs to be periodically adjusted due to population growth. However, since 2010 the Palestinians have refused to meet at the Joint Water Committee which was the instrument set up by Oslo to make proper adjustments. Israel, though, recognizing the need of Palestinians, has provided 5.5 billion gallons of water beyond what the agreement calls for in order to provide for the health of Palestinians.

While the report seeks to lay the blame for water shortages in the West Bank at the feet of Israel, it fails to mention the PA's failure to update its own infrastructure. The Palestinian Water Authority estimates that 33 percent of their water is lost due to poor infrastructure, lack of maintenance and water theft by Palestinian farmers.

Through water efficiency practices, water consumption per capita has actually decreased in Israel. Efforts to recycle and desalination has created savings for Israel, but the Palestinians have not sought similar processes while increasing their own per capita consumption. Again the truth demonstrates that Palestinians are at least equally to blame for the lack of fresh water. But the report places all of the blame on Israel. It is deceptive and dishonest.

## **Economic Development**

This is a true tragedy. Due to violence, policies of Israel and the corruption of the PA, the average Palestinian suffers economically. The violence of the First and Second Intifada resulted in new security procedures that have made it difficult for Palestinians to find meaningful employment. In addition much of the international aid that flowed into the region following Oslo disappeared due to the corruption of the PA, and never reached the average Palestinian. Now, through efforts of the BDS movement, further corporate investment and partnership is scared away so that Palestinians cannot find decent jobs.

If Palestine is to be a viable democracy, a robust middle class must develop, but under present conditions that will never happen. Blame for this lays at the feet of both Israelis and Palestinians and increasingly BDS. The

BDS Movement is making the entire region toxic, so that businesses fear to invest in the region. But there are courageous individuals and groups that are working to improve the economy.

A case in point is the building of Rawabi, a secular housing development located outside Ramallah. This project is the child of Basher Al-Masri, a Palestinian, who dreamed of a project that would employ thousands as well as provide safe and affordable housing for a growing middle class in Palestine. With money invested by Qatar and others, Rawabi is an example that projects can be built and provide for the greater quality of life of Palestinians. Yet even this wonderful project was condemned by BDS because Al-Masri dared to work with Israelis on this project.<sup>22</sup>

Are there impediments to improving the economic conditions in West Bank? Yes, of course, but they are not entirely the fault of Israel. As we are increasingly seeing, the BDS movement is as much a hindrance to progress as are certain right-wing factions within Israel. Yet the report does not point out the dangers of BDS, instead it only seeks to further its goals.

This is also similar to the report's inability to point to the tyrannical rule of Hamas in Gaza and lay the blame for the atrocious conditions that exist in Gaza where blame belongs, with Hamas. The authors seem to make the statement that Israel's blockade and actions against Gaza gives rise to extremists, when in fact the extremists predated any action of Israel. With building material that should be used to improve the housing stock or even spur economic growth being stolen by Hamas to build tunnels into Israel and Sinai, Hamas is hampering the growth of Gaza only to support its narrow agenda.

We can agree that in reforming some of Israel's policies and in changes made to the PA, economic benefits can be achieved in the West Bank in particular. For example, increasing the number of work permits for Palestinians to work within Israel and earn a living wage would be an important step towards improving the situation, and providing those Palestinians with the dignity of being able to envision an economic future. Yet, as Americans, we cannot force Israel to change its policies. We can encourage them, and by partnering with corporations, politicians and the American Jewish community, the PCUSA can leverage itself to make these changes a reality. As a corporate body, we can invest in peace, but instead we resort to divesting and ultimately shutting off our ability to have any influence in the region. Our denomination's past actions, going back to 2004, and the perception in the media of our association with BDS, and the statements made in the ACSWP Report, make it even less likely for us to be a force for peace and justice in the Middle East.

Instead of continuing to support the failed divestment agenda of BDS, we should be marshaling support within the denomination and the business community to support such efforts as Rawabi, renewable energy, water purification processes and other business ventures that will not only build the infrastructure of the future state of Palestine but provide good paying jobs for Palestinians.

## **Viability of the Two State Solution**

While the authors have spoken about the low prospects of a negotiated Two State Agreement, they do not offer any alternatives either. If not Two States, which is the desire of the world community, and the majority of Palestinians and Israelis, then what? Considering the mandate of the overture from the GA, the report fails to address this. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy has done a serious disservice to the Church with its report, and has only revealed its own political biases and association with BDS values. The Report is rife with historical errors, suffers from a lack of intellectual rigor, distorts facts, and is a deceptive means of

trying to promote a BDS agenda, that will result in support for a One State Solution, in which there will no longer be a Jewish state of Israel. The Report uses anti-Semitic language, and like the BDS Movement itself, places all responsibility for the conflict on the side of Israel. It fails to acknowledge the complex nature of the issues. It fails to acknowledge the numerous steps towards peace that Israel has taken since 1993, and the violent response that each step has been met with. We as a Church can, and should, do better.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Poll # 199, Palestinian Center for Public Opinion & Poll #59 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2016

<sup>2</sup> “You can’t save Israel from itself by appropriating BDS”, Omar Barghouti, October 30, 2015, Barghouti is the founder of the BDS Movement.

<sup>3</sup> [www.holylandarticles.com/zenitjan.1120112.html](http://www.holylandarticles.com/zenitjan.1120112.html)

<sup>4</sup> “The First and Second Intifada,” David Newman and Joel Peters, *Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Routledge, 2013, p. 56-67

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller history of the conflict and description of Palestinian leaderships decision to turn down statehood read Rashid Khalidi’s *The Iron Cage*.

<sup>6</sup> Sachar, Howard. *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*.

<sup>7</sup> “Abbas: Security Cooperation with Israel is ‘sacred’”, Middle East Monitor, May 27, 2014

<sup>8</sup> United National General Assembly Resolution 194, December 11, 1948. See: <http://www.mideastweb.org/194.htm>

<sup>9</sup> “Erekat: There will be no settlers in Palestine”, Israel National News, 1/27/2014

<sup>10</sup> Hamas Covenant 1988

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_cha\\_chapter1\\_rule1](https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_cha_chapter1_rule1)

<sup>12</sup> “In UN, PA maps erase all of Israel”, Israel National News, 9/21/2011

<sup>13</sup> Gregerman, Adam, “Old Wine in New Bottles”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Summer-Fall 2004, p. 329

<sup>14</sup> Braunold, Joe and Huda Abuarqoub, “A Bigger Threat Than BDS: Anti-Normalization” Haaretz, July 1, 2015 <sup>15</sup>  
Human Rights Watch

<sup>16</sup> Jacob, C. “Palestinian Journalists, Intellectuals Speak Out Against Children Participating in Terrorist Attacks and Against Targeting Civilians” Inquiry and Analysis Series Report 1216, The Middle East Media Research Institute, January 5, 2016

<sup>17</sup> Weiser, Benjamin, “Palestinian Groups Are Found Liable At Manhattan Terror Trial” NY Times, Feb. 23, 2015 <sup>18</sup>

<http://us.icej.org/media/christian-zionism-101>



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<sup>19</sup> Gregerman, Adam. "Israel as the Hermeneutical Jew" in Protestant Statements on the Land and State of Israel: Four Presbyterian Examples, *Kirche and Israel*, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Meshoe, Kenneth. "Pro-Palestinian Ads Misrepresent Apartheid" San Francisco Examiner, May 15, 2013

<sup>21</sup> Ahren, Raphael. "Is Israel an apartheid state? Answers from someone who'd know." The Times of Israel, Dec. 30, 2014

<sup>22</sup> "Palestinian "Rawabi" Tycoon Basher Masri must end all normalization activities with Israel" Electronic Intifada. 10/17/2012

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