

Resolution on Israel and Palestine: End the Occupation Now

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) recommends that the 215th General Assembly (2003) do the following:

1. Approve the following resolution with background rationale.
2. Direct the Stated Clerk to publish it on the PC(USA) Web site with notification to middle governing bodies and sessions, providing a copy upon request to each middle governing body or session, and distributing the Web site address to the entire church in the *Minutes* of the 215th General Assembly (2003), Part I.
3. Direct the Stated Clerk to communicate the import of this resolution to the different parties addressed, as well as to appropriate partners in the region.

RESOLUTION

The question of Palestine, now in its 56th year without resolution, has been the oldest continuing item on the agenda of the United Nations. From the beginning, the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians has been a subject of concern, prayer and action for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as well as other churches and ecumenical bodies in the region and the world. The church has shown concern for both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Our disquiet has been enunciated, as recently as a few months ago, when we protested attacks carried out against the Jews, their synagogues, and other institutions in various parts of the world. Our voice has been heard repeatedly on behalf of the suffering of the Palestinian people.

Since the war of June 1967 and the occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, that conflict has generally been characterized by violence. Except for a few periods when hope for peace seemed within reach, the strife has only intensified. During the past thirty months, in particular, the degree of violence, fear, anger, polarization, and bitterness has been unprecedented. Many innocent Israelis have fallen victim to desperate acts of terror at the hands of Palestinian extremists, while innumerable Palestinian civilians have experienced pain, suffering, degradation, and death under the yoke of Israel's heavy-handed military occupation.

The occupation is growing stronger, and the threat to Palestinian rights and Palestinian lives grows stronger, too. Despite this occupation that violates United Nations' resolutions, which the United States affirmed, Israel claims more support than ever from the United States. Alongside its military and economic subsidies from Washington, amounting to a quarter of the entire U.S. foreign aid budget, Israel has requested an additional \$4 billion in military aid, and \$8–10 billion in loan guarantees from U.S. taxpayers. That money would help sustain Israel's illegal occupation. Under this occupation, Palestinian civilians suffer under twenty-four-hour-a-day shoot-to-kill curfews. Israeli settlement expansion continues. Nearly 45 percent of West Bank land has already been expropriated from Palestinians for settlement purposes. Arbitrary arrests, detention, humiliation, torture, and harassment continue to the point of desperation. Even U.N. staff members are not immune.

Although it has spoken out, the church is often accused of being silent. Its call for justice and peace has continued to go unheeded. Now it must speak up and speak out again, perhaps in stronger language. Its message is clear, consistent, and straightforward: it calls for the broad goal of ending the occupation, appeals with a most urgent priority for international protection for Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation, and the protection of innocent Israeli citizens. The United States and the international community must act now to end the conflict and the occupation.

Therefore, the 215th General Assembly (2003):

- A. Asks pastors, lay leaders, sessions and individual members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to:
 1. Pray, and invite others to pray, to the God of Peace to direct the hearts, minds, wills, and actions of those in positions of authority or influence in the Middle East, as well as those who know only aggression and violence, to seek the ways of peace.
 2. Avail themselves of study resources that help them understand the history, nature, and dimensions of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

3. Seek out other Christians, Jews, and Muslims, in their own areas, to work together through interfaith peacebuilding, and in support of every effort made, whether by Israelis, Palestinians, the U.S. government, the United Nations, the Christian churches, and/or other religious and secular organizations that aim toward bringing about a just, honorable, secure, and viable peace in the Middle East.

4. Travel to the region, as may be feasible and opportune, to visit with Christian partners and others, to gain firsthand experience in understanding of the issues and dynamics behind the conflict, as well as the possibilities for peace and good will, making sure to take advantage of the contacts and travel study resources produced by the PC(USA) and its partners, as well as PC(USA) mission workers and others in the region, who are able to introduce visitors to a wide spectrum of perspectives and opinions within the communities of people in the Holy Land.

5. Take individual and collective initiatives to tell the truth, having “listened with both ears,” and to advocate for a just peace in the Middle East with their representatives in Congress, the administration, United Nations officials, local/regional/national newspaper editors and other opinion makers.

6. Participate and/or promote participation in the international Christian “Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel” (EAPPI), organized through the World Council of Churches, in partnership with Palestinian Christians (*for information, see www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/palestine/eap.html*).

7. Increase Presbyterian support to assist the churches in the region to build and maintain their capacity for retaining competent leadership and to create opportunities for vocational training and economic development, in order to curb the flight of Christians from the homeland of their faith.

B. Reaffirms the actions of previous General Assemblies (cf., in 1998, 1997, 1996, 1995, 1992, 1991, 1990 several resolutions, 1988, 1987, 1986, and earlier to 1967) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and communications by the Stated Clerk based on those actions (cf., most recently: April 5, 2002; March 8 and 11, 2002; October 14, 2000, etc.):

1. Supporting the resolutions of the United Nations, affirming the right of Israel to exist within secure borders, and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the establishment of their own sovereign state and the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

2. Calling on the Israelis and Palestinians to cease their acts of violence against each other.

3. Urging the Israeli government to end its expansionist policies of confiscation of land and water resources and the building and enlarging of settlements, and of collective punishment of Palestinians, such as is exercised through administrative detentions, demolition of homes, mass house imprisonment (“curfews”), uprooting olive trees, setting up road blocks and checkpoints, and other forms of harassment and humiliation.

4. Calling on the Israeli government to end the occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

5. Urging the United States government to intervene actively with the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to broker a just, secure, and permanent peace.

C. Urges the United Nations, in view of the continuing cycle of violence seen in suicide bombings and brutal attacks by Palestinian extremist groups, fierce aggression by the Israeli army against Palestinian civilians, the unending military siege of Palestinian towns and villages that has devastated their lives and brought about more violent resistance, to deploy an international peacekeeping force, in order to restore calm in the Occupied Territories, while resuming peace negotiations may be vigorously pursued.

D. Strongly urges Israeli and Palestinian leaders to be serious, active, and diligent about seeking peace for their peoples; or, if they are unwilling or unable, to step down and make room for other leaders who will and can.

E. Challenges and encourages discussion of theological interpretations that confuse biblical prophecies and affirmations of covenant, promise, and land, which are predicated on justice, righteousness, and mercy, with political statehood that asserts itself through military might, repressive discrimination, abuse of human rights, and other actions that do not reveal a will to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

F. Urges the government of Israel to hasten to end the occupation of Palestinian territories; and to accept the League of the Arab Nations’ unanimous offer for peace in return of the land occupied by Israel since 1967 and urges the League of the Arab Nations to commit to doing everything in their power to eliminate funding and support for terrorist acts against Israeli citizens.

G. Urges the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership to work on resolving the issue of the right of return. With the assistance of the United Nations, both sides can, if they will, strive for and reach, an understanding that affirms the right of return of Palestinians while working out a mutually acceptable formula for implementation.

H. Strongly urges the United States to take seriously its leadership role to begin a peace initiative that will end Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem and fulfill the stated goal of a two-state settlement based on the pre-1967 boundaries as directed by UNSC 242. The administration needs to be fair in listening to the legitimate needs of both the Israelis and the Palestinians and to require both to adhere to the same standards of nonaggression. An end of the occupation is essential to achieving peace and the common good of the two peoples and three faiths that are deeply rooted in this land.

I. Urges the United States government to demonstrate its seriousness about being the sponsor of the Middle East peace process and the creation of a viable Palestinian state "within three years" (two years now), by

1. undertaking steps to restructure and reallocate its present annual aid to the Middle East to enable and support strategies for development of the region as a whole;

2. devising such strategies that will result in human advancement, economic growth, a more equitable distribution of resources, improvement in the quality of education, greater participation in governance, and the empowerment of women;

3. assuring that U.S. policies and economic assistance programs contribute to these ends;

4. engaging other donors, and countries in the region, in conversations about how such goals can be achieved; and

5. ensuring that sufficient resources and economic aid are made available to the Palestinian people in order to help rebuild and modernize Palestinian schools, create effective vocational training programs, resuscitate the Palestinian economy by rebuilding the Gaza Airport, constructing the long-promised harbor, facilitating trade and meaningful employment, and reinforcing the administrative infrastructure.

J. Calls on the United States government and the United Nations to work closely with both the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership to establish effective mechanisms for examining and correcting their own respective application of the principles of participatory democracy, decent governance, and respect for human rights.

Background

A. *A Historical Synopsis of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*¹

1. *Introduction: "Day of Mourning, Day of Grief"*

On the day after Thanksgiving 2002, representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) attended a special observance of a Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, sponsored by the United Nations, and held at its New York headquarters. That day, November 29, 2002, marked the fifty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of Resolution 181 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In an address of General Secretary Kofi Annan, delivered on his behalf by S. Iqbal Riza, under-secretary-general and chef de cabinet, he said: "This Day of Solidarity is a day of mourning and a day of grief. The human and material losses sustained by the Palestinian people in the last two years have been nothing short of catastrophic. The deplorable situation in the occupied Palestinian territory has kept the whole [region] in a continuing state of crisis ... with no end in sight."

With no end in sight, the conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people is the oldest continuing item on the agenda of the United Nations since its inception in the middle of the twentieth century.

2. *Genesis and Evolution of the Conflict*

Contrary to a diversionary, popular myth that "Arabs and Jews have fought for two thousand years," it may be rightly asserted that the beginning of that conflict is traceable to the end of World War I, when European powers brought an end to more than four centuries of Ottoman domination in the Middle East. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the region was carved up by the Europeans into countries with boundaries that protected their interests in trade and in the area's resources.

a. *The Zionist Movement*

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the area known as Palestine, by then marginalized by the Ottomans, was home to more than 600,000 Muslim and Christian Arabs, and 25,000 Jews.² The

latter segment of that population was brought to Palestine from Europe as part of a movement, known as the “Zionist Movement,”³ that sought to provide Jews safety from waves of anti-Semitism, and to resettle them in a homeland related to the ancient people of biblical Israel. Another 40,000 European Jews had been added to Palestine’s population by 1914 when World War I started; though by the time it ended, the Jewish population of the area had dropped from about 85,000 to 56,000,⁴ through emigration.

b. The Balfour Declaration

It was during World War I that the British took control over the area, by encouraging an Arab rebellion against the Ottomans. An Arab revolt, led by T. E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”) and Faisal, son of Hussein ibn Ali, patriarch of the Hashemite family and Ottoman governor of Mecca and Medina, had been the outcome of a secret agreement between Sir Henry McMahon, Britain’s high commissioner in Egypt, and Hussein. However, Britain had made other promises during the war that conflicted with the McMahon-Hussein understandings. In 1917, the British Foreign Minister, Lord Arthur Balfour, issued a declaration (the “Balfour Declaration”) announcing his government’s support for the establishment of a “Jewish national state in Palestine.”⁵ Another promise was made between Britain and France that they would divide control over the region. The two nations subsequently persuaded the League of Nations, in which they were the dominant powers, to grant them authority over the former Ottoman territories. The British and French regimes were known as “mandates.” France obtained a mandate over Syria, carving out Lebanon as a separate state, while Britain obtained a mandate over Palestine (which now comprises Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip).⁶ In 1921, the British divided this region into two parts: east of the Jordan River became the “Emirate of Transjordan,” to be ruled by Faisal’s brother Abdullah, and west of the Jordan River became the Palestine Mandate. This was the first time in modern history that “Palestine” became a unified political entity.⁷

In the ensuing period, Arab anger was mounting over the British failure to fulfill its promise to create an independent Arab state, and was fueled by Britain’s promise to support the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Clashes of violence would break out between Arabs and Jews. In the 1920s, when the Jewish National Fund purchased large tracts of land from absentee Arab landowners, the Arabs living in these areas were evicted. Those displacements led to increased tension and violent confrontations between Jewish settlers and Arab peasant tenants.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 had become at once a consolidation of Britain’s imperialist goals in Palestine, and a warrant for an envisioned future national, political entity for world Jewry. Reinforced by rising anti-Semitism in Europe and a growing sense of political nationalism among European Jews, more Jewish settlers immigrated to Palestine. Combined with sentiments of religious fervor over the sacred sites, Arabs and Zionist Jews continued to clash. During the summer of 1929 in a confrontation in Hebron, for example, sixty-four Jews were killed, while their Muslim neighbors saved others. In one week of communal violence, 113 Jews and 115 Arabs were killed and many more wounded. The Jewish community ceased to exist when its surviving members left for Jerusalem.⁸

A tidal wave of manifest racism that spread with the rise of Adolf Hitler to power in 1933 led to the horrific tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust in Germany in which about six million Jews were tortured and exterminated. Mass emigration of European Jewish survivors ensued; and large numbers of immigrants were taken by Zionist organizations to Palestine, leading to new land purchases and the establishment of Jewish settlements there. Palestinian resistance to British control and Zionist settlements climaxed in the Arab revolt of 1936–39, which Britain suppressed with the help of Zionist militias and the complicity of neighboring Arab regimes. After crushing the Arab revolt, the British reconsidered their governing policies in order to maintain order in an increasingly tense environment. They issued a White Paper (a statement of political policy) limiting future Jewish immigration and land purchases. The Zionists regarded that as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration, and a particularly egregious act in light of the desperate situation of the Jews in Europe, who were facing extermination. The issuance of the 1939 White Paper marked the end of the British-Zionist alliance. At the same time, the defeat of the Arab revolt and the exile of the Palestinian leadership meant that the Palestinian Arabs were politically disorganized during the crucial decade in which the future of Palestine was decided.⁹

c. The Partition of Palestine

Following the Second World War, the Jewish population had reached more than half a million. Political pressures were building in the U.S. and Europe, as were Jewish and Arab attacks on British Mandate troops and Jewish terrorist actions against the Arab population. The British wanted out of a situation they could not control. They requested that the recently established United Nations determine the fate of Palestine. With no effective voice calling for the protection of Arab rights and interests and western nations anxious to atone for their silence during the holocaust, the western-dominated United Nations assumed the role of addressing the conflict.¹⁰ The “question of Palestine,” as it is often referred to in U.N. discourse, was first brought before its General Assembly in 1947, when the assembly decided to partition Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, with special international status for Jerusalem (UNSC 181). Though the proposed Palestinian state did not materialize, the land was partitioned in 1949 when an armistice divided the new Jewish state from other parts of the Mandate of Palestine. The West Bank and Gaza became distinct geographical units that, between 1948 and 1967, were ruled by Jordan. In 1950, Jordan annexed

the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and extended citizenship to Palestinians living there. Gaza remained under Egyptian military administration. Several wars were fought in the area, but in June 1967, Israel, during the six-day June war involving Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, captured and occupied these areas, along with the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria.

Israel established a military administration to govern the Palestinian residents of the Occupied West Bank and Gaza. Under this arrangement, “Palestinians were denied any basic political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of political association. Palestinian nationalism was criminalized as a threat to Israeli security, which meant that even displaying the Palestinian national colors was a punishable act. All aspects of Palestinian life were regulated, and often restricted by the Israeli military administration.”¹¹ In the name of maintaining Israel’s security, other Israeli policies of collective punishment of the Palestinian people have been exercised in the form of restricted movement and extended house imprisonments (referred to as “curfews”), closure of roads and schools, mass arrests and detentions without charges, torture, death in Israeli camps and prisons by abuse and neglect, home demolitions, expulsions and deportations, massive land confiscations, uprooting of entire fields of olive trees, and destruction of citrus groves.

With steady political and financial support from the United States, hundreds of colonies (often called “settlements”) have been built for hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers and immigrants on confiscated lands, in violation of international law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

d. *The PLO*

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) came into being in 1960, in an effort to regulate Palestinian nationalism. The Arab defeat in 1967 enabled the more militant Palestinians to take over the PLO, and to gain some independence from Arab regimes. It included different political and armed groups of varying ideological orientations. Yasser Arafat, chairman of Fatah, PLO’s largest political group, became PLO chairman in 1968. Though initially based outside of Israel, the PLO, like many other resistant movements, engaged in militant activities within Israel. There were other, more militant Palestinian groups that also carried out acts of violence against Israeli soldiers and citizens. Those included, for example, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Jihad and Hamas. Ironically, the latter, whose name in Arabic is an acronym for “Islamic resistance movement,” was initially enabled by Israel to undermine the PLO and its leadership and to divide the Palestinians.¹²

3. *Role of the United Nations*

Up to 1967, the Palestine problem was discussed as part of the larger Middle East conflict or in the context of its refugee or human rights aspects. As a consequence of the war in 1967, the security council adopted Resolution 242, on November 22 of that year, declaring the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, calling for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from the Palestinian territory occupied earlier that year, including Jerusalem, and from the other occupied Arab territories, affirming respect for the right of all states in the region to live in peace within secure and internationally recognized boundaries and the exercise of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, primarily the right to self-determination; and addressing the refugee problem. On November 10, 1973, following the Sinai War, the security council adopted another resolution (338) that called on all parties to start immediately to negotiate the implementation of UNSC 242.

It was only in 1974 that the question of Palestine was reintroduced in the U.N. General Assembly’s agenda as a national question, and the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people were reaffirmed and specified. In Resolution 3236, adopted November 22, 1974, the assembly stated that those rights included: the right to self-determination without external interference; the right to national independence and sovereignty; and the right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property, from which they had been displaced and uprooted. The assembly also stated that the realization of those rights was indispensable for the solution of the question of Palestine. In 1976, the security council recognized that the Palestinian issues were “at the heart of the Middle East problem,” and that “no solution could be envisaged without fully taking into account the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people.”¹³ The United Nations’ Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People urged the council to promote action for a just solution, taking into account all the powers conferred on it by the Charter of the United Nations. The recommendations of the committee included a two-phase plan for the return of Palestinians to their homes and property; a timetable for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories by June 1, 1977, with the provision, if necessary, of temporary peacemaking forces to facilitate the process; an end to the establishment of settlements; recognition by Israel of the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the occupied territories pending withdrawal; and endorsement of the inherent right of Palestinians to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty in Palestine. Along with those recommendations, there was the recognition of the United Nations’ historical duty and responsibility to render all assistance necessary to promote the economic development and prosperity of the future of the Palestinian entity.

It is significant to note that the recommendations made in its first report to the security council in June 1976 by the U.N.'s Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People were not adopted by the council, due to the negative vote of the United States, a permanent council member, and thus have not been implemented. They were, however, endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the General Assembly. The assembly reaffirmed that a just and lasting peace in the Middle East "could not be established without the achievement of a just solution of the problem of Palestine based on the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people." The United Nations, through the ongoing work of its Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian people, has continued to address the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

4. *Peace Initiatives and Setbacks*

a. *Treaty with Egypt*

A number of significant events, occurring independently of United Nations' intervention, provided some hope for a peaceful settlement. A bold initiative taken by the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in late 1977 when he visited Jerusalem culminated in signing a peace treaty with Israel, which occurred at Camp David in 1979, after some intensive negotiations hosted by President Jimmy Carter. The Camp David accords consisted of two agreements: the first formed the basis of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty; the second proposed to grant autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and to install a local administration for a five-year interim period after which the final status of the territories would be negotiated. Only the Egyptian-Israeli part of the Camp David agreements was implemented. The Palestinians and other Arab states rejected the autonomy concept because it did not guarantee full Israeli withdrawal from areas captured in 1967 or the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Meanwhile, Israel continued to confiscate Palestinian lands and build new Israeli settlements in violation of the commitments it made at Camp David.

b. *The First Intifada*

Despite the inclusion of a plan to realize self-determination for the Palestinians, the PLO and neighboring Arab states viewed Egypt's separate peace treaty with Israel as a betrayal. Eventually, though, the PLO sent signals that it could accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel and might be prepared to desist from violent attacks against it. It was in November 1985 that a more explicit enunciation of that Palestinian position was made gaining an acknowledgement by the United States that there may be room for negotiation with the Palestinians. No significant action followed to demonstrate a serious intention to seize an opportunity for peace. And so it was in the context of that inaction, as well as Israel's unremitting repression of the Palestinian people, that a mass uprising involving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, mostly women, youth, and children, started in 1987. Known as the "intifada," (Arabic for "awakening," or, literally, "shaking off one's sleep,"), and organized primarily by local communities, the uprising took different forms of civil disobedience, many of which involved intense confrontation between Palestinian civilians and the Israeli army. Lasting for several years, the intifada was met with fierce response from the Israeli military. Under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, then defense minister, the Israeli army killed more than one thousand Palestinians including more than two hundred under the age of sixteen. Hundreds more were wounded or maimed, as army commanders had instructed Israeli troops to shoot or break the bones of demonstrators. Countless others suffered untold psychological trauma, not to mention the economic and social upheaval that resulted from the intifada and Israel's attempt to squelch it. And though it drew unprecedented international attention and presented the Israeli occupation with a serious challenge, by 1990 the intifada lost its cohesive force, as many of its leaders had been killed or arrested. Political divisions and violence within the Palestinian community escalated.

c. *The Persian Gulf War*

Hurtful to the cause of the Palestinians was the PLO's opposition to the U.S.-led war against Iraq in 1991. They were effectively isolated, and their financial aid from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia was cut off. Nevertheless, following the war, the U.S. saw the need to stabilize its position in the Middle East by promoting a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait also were anxious to remove the instability created in the region by the conflict.

The United States influenced Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to open negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab states. Secret negotiations were held. Those led to a multilateral International Peace Conference that was held in Madrid in October 1991. Many subsequent negotiating sessions took place in Washington between a Palestinian delegation that notably excluded the PLO and any representatives from East Jerusalem. Very little progress was achieved. Israel's announced strategy, under Shamir, was to drag out the negotiations "for ten years," by which the annexation of the West Bank would be accomplished.

In 1992, a new government in Israel, led by the Labor Party, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin promised rapid conclusion of an Israel-Palestinian agreement. Instead, the Washington negotiations became stalemated. Human rights in the West Bank and Gaza further deteriorated, and by December more than four hundred Palestinians were expelled on the grounds of being radical Islamic activists, without being tried or convicted. This, in turn, gave rise to increased radicalism and violent attacks by militant Islamists against Israeli targets, which brought on further

repression by Israel. It was becoming apparent to the government of Israel that the threat of radical resistance by Hamas and Jihad was becoming greater. "The fear of radicalism," combined with the weakness of the PLO after the Persian Gulf War, and the stalemate in Washington negotiations "brought the Rabin government to reverse the long-standing refusal to negotiate with the PLO."¹⁴

d. *Autonomy Agreement*

A "Declaration of Principles" was signed at the White House on September 13, 1993. It was based on mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, and drew up plans for Israel to withdraw, in stages, from particular areas of the Occupied Territories that would be governed by a Palestinian Authority (P.A.). Parenthetically, it should be added that as the P.A. took over the rule of the "autonomous areas," a highly centralized form of government was adopted that involved Yasser Arafat at every level of decision-making. And though the authority ostensibly espouses an ideology of democracy, the concentration of power in its apparatus has tended toward undemocratic practices. There have been many human rights violations; and corruption is feared to be prevalent. However, the challenges of the Israeli occupation presented the Palestinians with little choice but to accept the authority's present leadership as the struggle for self-determination continues. The "Declaration of Principles" led to a further agreement signed in Oslo, Norway, in 1993, to proceed on the implementation of the principles declared earlier in Washington.

In retrospect, the Oslo plan was "deeply flawed" as the key issues such as the extent of the territories to be ceded by Israel, the nature of the Palestinian entity to be established, the future of Israeli settlements, and settlers, water rights, the resolution of the refugee problem and the status of Jerusalem were set aside to be discussed in "final status" talks.¹⁵ The plan devised a negotiating process "without specifying an outcome;" it had no diplomatic support from the Arab world, was impeded by Israel's "reluctance to relinquish control over the occupied territories and unwillingness to make the kinds of concessions necessary to reach final status agreement." Clearly the plan was not acceptable to many Palestinians, especially radical Islamists. The Palestinians were divided; yet, Arafat was the only one with sufficient prestige to proceed with negotiations. During the protracted interim period of the Oslo process, the Israeli government, under either Likud or Labor, built new settlements in the Occupied Territories, expanded existing settlements, constructed a network of bypass roads to enable Israeli settlers to travel from their settlements to Israel proper without passing through Palestinian inhabited areas. "These projects were understood by Palestinians as marking out territory that Israel sought to annex in the final settlement." The Oslo accords "contained no mechanism to block these unilateral actions of Israel's violations of Palestinian human and civil rights in areas under its control."¹⁶ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (1996–99) basically avoided engaging seriously in the peace process, which he "distrusted and fundamentally opposed."¹⁷

Resumption of negotiations took place with some momentum in 2000, after the election of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, of the Labor Party, in 1999. By then, a series of "painfully negotiated Israeli interim withdrawals left the Palestinian Authority with direct operational control of some 40 percent of the West Bank and 65 percent of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian areas were surrounded by Israeli controlled territory with entry and exit controlled by Israel."¹⁸

e. *Camp David II*

Subsequent efforts to keep the peace process alive brought the Israelis and Palestinians to further negotiations when President Clinton invited Barak and Arafat to Camp David in July 2000 to conclude a "final status," which was long overdue. It was then that Barak was said to have made his presumably irresistible offer to the Palestinians, which was, in fact, a far more extensive withdrawal from the West Bank than any other Israeli leader had publicly considered. What he did offer, in reality, as may be seen on maps presented at Camp David and Wye River talks, was a territorial fragmentation of the West Bank, where noncontiguous parts of the West Bank clearly isolated the Palestinians in inaccessible ghettos. Barak insisted that: Israel would not return to pre-1967 borders; East Jerusalem with its 175,000 Israeli settlers would remain under Israeli sovereignty; Israel would annex settlement blocs in the West Bank containing some 80 percent of 180,000 Jewish settlers; and Israel would accept responsibility for the huge refugee problem it had created. Each one of those points was clearly in contravention of the resolutions adopted by the United Nations. It was not surprising that Arafat refused the Barak "offer," or that the "peace process" was once again idled.

It is significant that the United States has assumed the role of the sole "sponsor" of the peace process, while it has also maintained the position of being Israel's staunchest supporter. It has consistently used its veto power in the U. N. Security Council to protect Israel from actions and criticism the council finds unacceptable. It has not allowed even its allies a significant role in seeking an Arab-Israeli settlement. "Even the breakthrough of the Oslo talks had to be formalized in Washington, and the U.S. has made no effort to involve Norway or other intermediaries further."¹⁹ The special relationship between the U.S. and Israel makes clear that "the United States does not have a single foreign policy for the Middle East. Rather there is an Israel policy and a policy for all other areas. The two are frequently at odds in ways that contribute to regional instability ... At the heart of U.S. tensions with many countries in the Middle East is their frustration with an open American double standard that always favors Israel."²⁰ Therefore, it should not be surprising that Palestinian anger with Israel and frustration with the United States continues to mount, and that no

progress has been made in the way of peace between Israel and the Palestinians or with other neighbors. The credibility of the U.S. as an “honest broker,” and its role as the only intermediary allowed at the table, come into serious question so long as it maintains a stance of unconditional commitment to support the goals and practices of Israel’s government.

5. *The Issues of Peace*

In his article, included among resource materials cited in this background (see endnote 1), Walter Owensby has outlined the issues of peace, with a brief description for each. Here we merely include questions awaiting resolution, based on that list:

- Borders and access
- Israeli settlements
- Israeli security
- Jerusalem
- Palestinian refugees
- Water resources

6. *The Current Situation*

Life in Israel/Palestine recently has been more difficult than could have been imagined a decade ago when Rabin and Arafat signed their “Declaration of Principles” on the lawn of the White House. Hardly a day passes without reports of intense violence between the Israeli forces and settlers and Palestinian militants. Bloody assaults on Israeli soldiers and civilians by Palestinian extremists, including suicide bombers, and massive military attacks by the Israelis targeting individuals, groups, and entire segments of the Palestinian population, have kept the situation in constant turmoil. The escalation of these conditions reached terrifying proportions especially during late 2002 and the early months of 2003 when the world’s attention was diverted as the U.S. was preparing to attack Iraq.²¹ And, while those preparations were building up, there was genuine anxiety among many Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel over what the Israeli government might do in case of an immanent Gulf war. Recalling the large-scale expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 and 1967, and experiencing continuing smaller-scale deportations, natives of Palestine have been horrified at the possibility of mass exiles. Often referred to as “transfer,” and compared sometimes to ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, fear of the familiar expulsion practice is reinforced in the psyche and consciousness of the Palestinians by expressions of the Israeli public favoring their removal.²² There are currently 3.6 million registered Palestinian refugees, one-third of whom live in fifty-nine refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip. The refugee problem already constitutes a major obstacle to peace, given that the United Nations, in General Assembly Resolution 194, provides for the refugees’ right to return to their homes in what became Israel, or to compensation. The feared expulsion of more Palestinians would, in effect, eliminate any remaining hope for a political settlement with Israel.

The picture is bleak. During the past thirty months, whenever it has seemed that matters could not be worse they got worse. The present chapter of the history of this conflict began when, on September 28, 2000, then-Likud leader, now prime minister, Ariel Sharon, accompanied by one thousand armed guards, visited the Dome of the Rock/Al-Aqsa Mosque/the Western Wall area (a site sacred to both Muslims and Jews, and is known to Jews as the Temple Mound, and to Muslims as al-Haram al-Sharif). In the context of tense negotiations over Jerusalem’s holy places taking place in July between the Israeli and Palestinian delegations, and Ariel Sharon’s call for the annexation of East Jerusalem, his move provoked large Palestinian protests in Jerusalem. Israeli soldiers killed six Palestinian protesters. The killing triggered further demonstrations that sparked a widespread movement that came to be known as the Second Intifada, or al-Aqsa Intifada.

The incident evolved into a spiral of violence that has left hundreds of Israelis, soldiers and civilians, and more than two thousand Palestinians, mostly civilians, dead and many more wounded. As in the first intifada, Palestinian youth threw stones and Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers and tanks. Unlike in the previous confrontations, Palestinian fighters have used small arms and fired often on Israeli soldiers; the more militant among them have been carrying out a series of horrific suicide bombings mostly against crowds of civilian Israelis. The Israeli military, on the other hand, having responded mostly with rubber-coated steel bullets and live ammunition in the first intifada, has now employed heavy artillery and attack helicopters.

As violence continues, Israel persists in its policies of land expropriation; settlement building and expansion; demolition of houses and destruction of private property; mass arrests; round-the-clock shoot-to-kill curfews; siege and closure; plundering of Palestinian towns, villages, and refugee camps, leaving in its wake large numbers of innocent victims, described with scorn as “collateral damage”; arbitrary arrest, detention, and harassment of civilians; extrajudicial executions²³ and murderous raids; the devastation of farmlands; and the construction of

bypass roads, and a 25-foot-high concrete wall that is expected to be 200+ miles long when completed, with trenches, electric fences, sensors, cameras, and armed watchtowers. Repeatedly, the Palestinians have appealed to the United Nations for providing peacekeeping and monitoring forces, but their requests were blocked by Israel. In a statement of the chairperson of the U. N. Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People delivered in the autumn of 2002 before a gathering of representatives of more than 120 governments and some fifty nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), he said, "A further blow compounding this situation is the fact that the Palestinian economy lies in tatters. Poverty and unemployment are rising exponentially, the public health and hygiene sectors have crumbled and the Palestinian Authority is in disarray. Instead of concentrating their efforts on the building of a democratic state, and pursuing its economic development, the Palestinians are reduced to the daily struggle for survival, in which, according to the sad comment of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), pauperization and food insecurity affect millions of people in the West Bank and Gaza."²⁴

"The unbearable suffering," the statement continued, "and inhuman collective reprisals thus imposed on the Palestinian civilian population undoubtedly constitute grave violations of the fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War, and of the very clear obligations which Israel is mandated to fulfill."

In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, Israel has equated its military offensive against the Palestinians with the United States' "war on terrorism." Prime Minister Sharon, who in the space of two years has flown to the United States no fewer than seven times, has asked for another \$4 billion in additional military assistance, in addition to the \$3 billion annual grant it receives automatically, plus \$8 billion in commercial loan guarantees.²⁵ It is relevant to note that besides the annual cash grants for military and economic assistance given to Israel at the beginning of each year, and without the usual conditions attached to project aid given to other countries, the United States has converted all previous loans extended to Israel to grants, and Congress now continues the annual practice.²⁶ The Israeli government has energetically supported the U.S.' push for war against Iraq on grounds of the latter's noncompliance with seventeen U.N. resolutions. So, it should be relevant to question Israel's noncompliance with more than fifty U.N. resolutions.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan spoke truth when, in his address on the U.N.-called Day of Palestinian Solidarity last November, he declared it a "day of mourning, a day of grief," and sited the state of crisis and the deplorable situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories "with no end in sight." Indeed, there can be "no end in sight" if the apparent Sharon-Bush Middle East policy partnership prevails. In alliance with some evangelical Christians, the course plotted by powerful Sharon-backers in the Administration "began with benign neglect of the Mideast peace process as Intifada II escalated. September 11 provided the impulse for a military campaign to consign Saddam Hussein to the dustbin of history. Mr. Sharon provided the geopolitical ammo by convincing Mr. Bush that the war on Palestinian terrorism was identical to the global war on terror. Next came a campaign to convince U. S. public opinion that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were allies in their war against America . . . the strategic objective is the antithesis of Middle Eastern stability. . . ."²⁷

Confronted with these sobering realities, the inevitable question of seriousness about a future peace in Israel-Palestine imposes itself. Critical reform of Palestinian institutions, perhaps even a change of leadership, is essential, primarily for the benefit of the Palestinian people themselves. However, to take root and produce tangible results it must, for a start, be matched by "Israeli measures that would create favorable conditions for the resumption of economic activity. This includes the conclusion of a Palestinian/Israeli security agreement ensuring the end of all forms of violence, withdrawal from Palestinian-controlled areas, the immediate cessation of settlement activity, the lifting of restriction on the movement of people, goods and essential services, and the disbursement of all outstanding value-added tax and customs revenues owed to the Palestinian Authority."²⁸ Those are the required first steps on what may be a long and difficult road to peace. The goal that was unanimously endorsed by Resolutions 181, 242 and 338, and that has pointed the direction of any hope for peace in the region, however, remains clear: namely to end the occupation of lands captured in 1967, and to give back to the Palestinian people their freedom.

B. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Israel/Palestine

The appearance of the Risen Christ to the women at the tomb, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the gathered multitudes on the Day of Pentecost, signaled the beginning of two thousand years of unbroken witness by the Church, beginning in Jerusalem. It was from Jerusalem that the message of God's salvation in Christ was carried out to Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Despite untold persecution and suffering, faithful disciples of succeeding generations kept the gospel alive in Jerusalem as well. To this day, many Christians of the Holy Land claim, in the absence of contradictory evidence, to be the direct descendants of those who embraced the faith at the hands of the early apostles. The globalization of the gospel that was responsible for spreading good news out of Jerusalem into the world was also the factor involved in the modern missionary movement that reached out to Jerusalem and to the land of Jesus.

Although the Presbyterian Church has been involved in direct missionary outreach in the Middle East for close to two centuries, it was content to cooperate with the churches and other mission societies that lived out their witness in

the Jordan Valley. Today, the PC(USA) holds partnership with the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan, Palestine and Jerusalem and the Middle East Council of Churches. It works closely with a number of other church bodies, ecumenical organizations, theological institutions, advocacy groups, several Christian and interfaith service and development agencies in Israel, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza.

Long before the Israeli government or the United States showed a willingness even to talk with the Palestinians, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had close ecumenical ties with their Christian leaders, and, through them, opened channels of communication with leaders of Palestinian society. It would not be far-fetched to assert that those intentional efforts, combined with similar commitments and actions of other churches and faith communities, played an important role in lifting up what was at stake in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and advocating a necessary dialogue. Through the appointment of personnel to work with partner churches and institutions in Israel/Palestine, sponsoring travel-study seminars, contributing to refugee relief and resettlement, combating hunger and poverty, promoting education, health and leadership development, participating vocational training programs and self-development projects, programs supporting peace, justice and human rights movements, engaging in constituency education and mobilizing to influence public policy. The Presbyterian United Nations Office, Washington Office, Peacemaking Program and Social Witness Policy offices, Office of Communication and the Office of the General Assembly, in collaboration with the Office for the Middle East, have worked together to provide ways to resource the church's constituency in carrying out the policies and actions adopted by the church's elected bodies and its successive general assemblies. Countless individuals, groups, committees, congregations, and ecumenical councils, coalitions and networks in which Presbyterians participate have worked diligently over the years to promote justice and peace in Israel/Palestine and in the Middle East. Essentially, the Presbyterian position has been: to affirm the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign state within secure, internationally recognized borders, and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the establishment of a neighboring independent, sovereign state, toward the end of establishing a just and durable peace. To that end, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been consistent in lifting up the legitimate rights of both the Jewish and the Palestinian peoples.

Thus, the PC(USA) has invested itself in a seven-year study of biblical, theological, historical and current dimensions of Christian-Jewish relations, which resulted in a landmark position paper titled, "Toward a Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews," adopted and published in 1987. In that paper, making a clear distinction between an understanding of the "people of Israel" and the contemporary, political "State of Israel," the church affirmed the continuity of the divine covenant with Israel, the people, including the promise of land which, throughout the testimony of the Scriptures, is inseparable from Israel's fulfillment of the demands of justice for all who dwell in it. In that position, the church accepts its special covenant relationship with God in Christ, in continuity with God's covenant with the people of Israel, and implicitly rejects fundamentalist, dispensationalist interpretations equating the birth of the modern state of Israel as a literal fulfillment of the biblical promise, and as such the beginning of Armageddon, the end-time battle in which the Jews would ultimately have to be converted or destroyed.

Recalling the tragedies of the Holocaust, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has, in subsequent years, spoken out explicitly against attacks perpetrated against the Jews and their synagogues and Israel and its embassies, as well as against deplorable acts of violence and terror, such as "suicide bombings," against innocent Israeli citizens.

Besides denouncing provocative assaults, the church has also welcomed, in June 2002, the statement titled "*Dabru Emet*," (Let Us Speak Truth") issued earlier by a number of renowned Jewish theologians, rabbis, and intellectuals.

Additionally, recognizing the evils of racism and the dangers of religious prejudice, the General Assembly of the church, has, for over thirty years, promoted and resourced interfaith openness, dialogue, and cooperation, and has had a distinguished record of making such participation possible.

While not condoning or minimizing villainous acts of violence by extremist individuals or groups among the Palestinian population, and in its quest for a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine, the church has been impelled, on the other hand, to cry out against Israeli behavior that is contradictory to what it knows to be the essential ethical principles of the Jewish faith, and to the moral and social values of the Jewish people. For over fifty years of Israeli rule in Palestine, and more than thirty years of illegal military occupation, the world has witnessed a flagrantly unjust treatment of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel, atrocities frequently committed against them by the Israeli military, a complicity of the U. S. government in dealing with the issue, and an unmistakable bias of the U.S. media toward Israel.

Nearly every year, from 1969 to the present, the General Assembly addressed issues of the Middle East and of Israel/Palestine, in particular. In addition to the inclusion of G.A. actions in its *Minutes*, overtures, resolutions, and other statements have been published in the church's *Church & Society* magazine subsequent to each assembly meeting. Some of the resolutions, and summaries of others, have been disseminated more widely for study and action.²⁹

C. Conclusion

At this point, the words of the U.N. secretary-general ring true: “There is no end in sight.” The thought is echoed by many ordinary Palestinians: “There is no reason for optimism, no future.” This is not, however, the conviction of the people of faith. For “what is faith? Faith gives substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see.”³⁰ Our faith is in God who, according to our Reformed understanding, is sovereign over all nations, peoples, and governments, and is Lord of history and of human destiny. God’s ways are the paths of justice, truth, and peace; and in God’s time, these shall prevail. Our faith impels us to move forward with hope against all that may drive us to despair. In faith we see beyond a future to be realized beyond what we see today. We strive, therefore, and challenge those entrusted with the power and authority to act, toward the norm by which all thoughts, decisions and actions are to be measured and judged, namely, that which God has already shown: For what are God’s demands of all of us other than evidences of just action, passions for loving-kindness, and a humble walk with God.”³¹

Endnotes

1. This section draws extensively on official public records of the United Nations, as well as a study prepared by the Reverend Walter Owensby, former associate for International Affairs in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Washington Office, as one of the resources offered by an ecumenical Middle East Forum and posted on Web sites of participating church-related organizations, and a series of research articles prepared by Joel Benin and Lisa Hajjar for the Middle East Report and Information Project. Those works, referenced below as appropriate, are used and posted on, or via link to, PC(USA)’s Website by permission.
2. See a study titled, “U.S. Policy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?” prepared by Walter Owensby, for the CWSW Middle East Forum. (View entire document on the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.] Web site: <http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/ep/region/mideast.htm> and click on “Crisis in the Middle East Palestine and Israel;” or download directly from <http://loga.org/mideastforum/Resources/USpolicv.htm>).
3. Zionism is a modern political movement that, in its essence, expresses Jewish nationalism. Drawing on Jewish religious attachment to Jerusalem and the Biblical Land of Israel (*eretz Ysrael*), yet political in ideology, the main driving force behind the movement is the belief that all Jews are one nation, and not simply a religious or ethnic community, and that their freedom from persecution and anti-Semitism is to settle as many Jews as possible in a national state to be called Israel in the land of Palestine. Influenced by colonial ideas about Europe’s rights to claim and settle other parts of the world, the World Zionist Organization, founded by Theodor Hertzl in 1897, declared that the aim of Zionism was ‘Establish a national home for the Jewish people secured by public law.’ (See article on “Zionism” in a special edition of *MERIP: The Middle East Research and Information Project* titled, “Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer,” by Joel Benin and Lisa Hajjar, January 2001.
4. Owensby, W. *op. cit.*
5. *MERIP, Primer*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid*
7. *Ibid*
8. *Ibid*, p. 5.
9. *Ibid*, p. 6.
10. Owensby, W. *op. cit.*
11. *Primer*, p. 10
12. *Ibid*, p. 15.
13. United Nations: *The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the Division for Palestinian Rights: Information Note*. New York, 2002, p. 2.
14. *Primer*, p. 15.
15. *Ibid*
16. *Ibid*
17. *Ibid*
18. *Ibid*
19. Owensby; *op. cit.*
20. *Ibid*

21. For an analysis of the impact of a war on Iraq, see an article (posted on the Web site of the PC(USA)) prepared by the Reverend Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Christmas Evangelical Lutheran of Bethlehem, who has served in the first half of 2003 as mission partner in residence, jointly on the staff of the Worldwide Ministries Division and the faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.
22. “Recent polls show more than 40 percent of the Israeli public is in favor of ‘transferring’ Palestinians out of the Occupied territories, and as many as one-third favor expelling Palestinians who are full citizens of Israel. The premise is that such deportations would enhance national security and solve the ‘demographic problem.’” (See “Prevent Mass Expulsions of Palestinians Under Cover of War with Iraq,” published by the American Friends Service Committee. Philadelphia: October 2002, following a visit to Israel and Palestine by an international Quaker delegation. [*Bold type is part of the statement.*])
23. Since November 2000, according to the Israeli human rights organization B’tselem, Israel has conducted 85 extrajudicial executions—or ‘targeted killings’ in Israeli parlance—of Palestinian militia leaders and security personnel suspected of involvement in attacks on Israelis. In a February 17, 2003, article by the editor and associate editors of Middle East Report Online, citing the B’tselem figure, Chris Toensing and Ian Urbina referred to a recent report in *The Forward*, a New York-based Jewish weekly, asserting that “US and Israeli legal experts have met in recent months to discuss methods of justifying the legality of assassination.” They added, “According to high-level Israeli sources, US representatives had approached Israeli government jurists to hear about methods of confronting possible challenges, either in international or domestic courts, to ‘targeted killings’ that might be sanctioned by Washington.” (See “Israel, the US and ‘Targeted Killings’” *MERIP*, February, 2003.)
24. Statement by Papa Louis Fall, November 2002, translated from the French.
25. See article by Arnaud de Borchgrave titled, “A Bush-Sharon Doctrine,” in the *Washington Times*, February 14, 2003.
26. Owensby, W. op. cit.
27. Ibid. See also, in the same article, a further elucidation based on a paper published in 1996 by the Israeli think tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, titled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.”
28. Annan, Kofi, statement on International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, delivered at the United Nations, New York, on November 29, 2002.
29. See, for example, *Resolution on the Middle East*, approved by the 199th General Assembly (1997); edited for publication by Victor E. Makari and Peter Sulyok, and published jointly by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy and the Worldwide Ministries Division. See also the resolution approved by the 214th General Assembly (2002), providing references to study resources and contact addresses and Web links to partner and colleague organizations working on related issues; letters sent by the Stated Clerk to Palestinian, Israeli and U.S. officials communicating the church’s concerns. (Materials are posted on the church’s Web pages.)
30. The Letter to the Hebrews, 11:1 (NEB).
31. The Book of Micah, 6:8, translated from the Hebrew.