



US Churches and the Middle East: Supporting Peace
A Briefing Paper Prepared for the Presidential Transition Team
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This Briefing Paper is an informal document, prepared for the Presidential Transition Team at the request of several heads of communion of member churches of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA. It does not speak for the churches and has not been formally endorsed by them, but it does attempt to present the shared experiences, perspectives, relationships, and engagements of Catholic, Orthodox, and Mainline Protestant represented in the United States by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the NCCCUSA.

Introduction

Perhaps the most enduring conflict in the world today is the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is one on which issues of justice and peace, development and rights, and politics and religion all converge, and its resolution will have far-reaching and positive impact, not only on the local populations (Israelis and Palestinians—Jews, Christians, and Muslims), but also for people of the three Abrahamic faiths all over the world who care deeply about Jerusalem and who yearn for peace. People of faith have a stake in the resolution of this conflict. The religious communities in the United States have been especially active in promoting peace in the Middle East through various avenues—sometimes together and sometimes separately. US Christians among them are quite concerned about the ongoing violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, and are engaged in efforts to seek a sustainable and just peace in the land often called “holy.” Such an outcome is in the interests of Israelis and Palestinians, of Americans and the United States, and people throughout the world. This paper will attempt to provide a summary of the historic and contemporary ties the US churches* have in the region, the positions the churches have taken, and the effort we are making to advocate for a just and lasting peace.

[*Note: The use of the phrase “US Churches” refers here and throughout this paper to those communions who are members of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA – Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Historic Black Churches, Historic Peace Churches, and Mainline Protestant Churches – as well as to the Roman Catholic Church.]

Historic and contemporary ties

When speaking to US audiences about Christianity in the Middle East, church leaders often discover that their audiences are surprised to hear about Christian presence in the region. Of course, the narratives of the Christian scripture and the places of Jesus’ birth,



youth, ministry, passion, crucifixion, and resurrection are located in the lands of Israel and Palestine. The first churches were established there—churches which continue to nurture members and to engage in a variety of ministry. Today, these same churches (primarily Armenian, Coptic, Greek, and Syrian Orthodox, as well as Catholic) are also manifest throughout the world, including in the United States, and so members of these churches have an organic and spiritual tie to churches that exist—and in fact were established up to two millennia ago—in the Middle East.

A number of churches in the Middle East have institutional histories that are shorter, tracing their genesis to more contemporary times and to various missionary movements. In Israel and the Palestine Territories, the most prominent examples are the Anglican (Episcopal) and Lutheran churches. It is important to note that their membership is local and, if traced through the generations, finds roots in the historic churches of the region. Such a presence means that American Episcopalians and Lutherans enjoy similar organic ties to local churches as the Orthodox and Catholic churches. More broadly in the Middle East, Presbyterians (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran), and Congregational churches (Armenian Protestants throughout the region) exist, owing to the 18th century missionary movement of the predecessors of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ. These churches are fully independent, and enjoy partnership relationships with their ecclesial counterparts in the US. The missionary movement did not bring Christianity to the Middle East, but was important in the diversification of the already extant manifestation of Christianity.

Today, US Orthodox and Catholic churches maintain close relationships with their counterpart churches in the Middle East. US Protestants, both those who have such organic ties as well as others who have developed partnerships, keep close contact, as well as engaging in various ecumenical relationships with groups in the region. Such partnerships involve prayer and spiritual support, church-to-church contacts and relationships, and even financial support. In Israel and Palestine, such partnerships exist with the variety of churches—Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant (primarily Anglican and Lutheran) as well as a number of church-related organizations, including:

- the YMCA of East Jerusalem (which serves the Palestinian population in Jerusalem and the West Bank) [<http://www.ej-ymca.org/>]
- the YWCA of Palestine [<http://www.ywca-palestine.org/>]
- the Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches [<http://www.mec-churches.org/>]
- the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center [<http://www.mec-churches.org/>]
- the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel [<http://www.eappi.org/>]

These close partnerships enable profound opportunities for relationship and understanding of the reality and context of peoples' lives and institutions' ministries and witness.



US Christians thus have close ties to the churches of the Middle East: Christian history is centered there, so all of the churches trace their histories to the region; some of our churches have organic relationships with existing churches there; and others of us have strong ecumenical partnerships in the region in the spirit of Christian community.

Policy positions of the US churches

The US churches' positions on social and political issues around the world are informed by scriptural understanding and are theologically based in the life and witness of Jesus Christ—ideas of love for neighbor, justice for the oppressed, and abundant life for all people. The kinds of close ties that the US churches have with the churches and church-related organizations in the Middle East, and particularly in Israel/Palestine, have for a long time helped to inform the way that the US churches understand the social, political, and economic context in the Middle East. Our closest faith connections are with the Christians of the Middle East, whose witness and ministries are significant and recognized as such by other faith communities, despite their relatively small numbers, which are diminishing.

While there is no comprehensive and unified position on the Middle East and Israel/Palestine shared by all of the churches, several elements are generally held and form the basis of advocacy positions. These include:

- Support for the churches and Christians of the region, whose diminishing relative size threatens the quality of witness they may offer;
- Participation in ecumenical and interfaith efforts;
- Calling for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ensures the safety and security of both Israel and a Palestinian state, as well as affording territorial contiguity and viability. This call involves the resolution of border issues, (with the 1949-1967 armistice line [the “Green Line”], UN resolutions 242 and 338 as a basis), including the issue of the separation barrier, an end to occupation of Palestinian lands, and resolution of the settlement issue.
- A shared Jerusalem, open to Israelis and Palestinians—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—is desired.
- An end to violence and terror in all forms is imperative.
- A comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace is necessary, one that will include an end to a state of war in the region and address all population (including the situation of refugees) and territorial concerns in a just and equitable way.

These positions are found in the National Council of Churches of Christ Middle East Policy Paper (1980) that was adopted by many of the NCCC members soon afterward, and reaffirmed by the NCCC Governing Board [<http://www.nccusa.org/news/ga2007.reaffirmationmideast.html>] with clear attention to these points as recently as September 2007. They are also found in the corpus of positions of individual churches, according to their various governing body processes. The US Council of Catholic Bishops, for example, have posted a number of items on the



Middle East on their website
[<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/israelpalestine.shtml>].

Our interfaith engagement

US churches are engaged in relationships with other faith communities at the national level in two ways: in direct relationships (such as Catholic-Muslim dialogue, or Methodist-Jewish dialogue) and ecumenically, through the National Council of Churches' Interfaith Relations Commission. By way of the latter, two current dialogue opportunities take place: a Jewish-Christian dialogue table, and the National Muslim-Christian Initiative. While ecumenical Christian dialogue and engagement with the Jewish and Muslim communities have decades-long histories—and indeed are quite vibrant at the local and regional settings as well—the current national manifestations have been in existence for a shorter period of time.

The National Muslim-Christian Initiative has developed in the past year, and focuses primarily on issues of relevance to the Muslim and Christian communities in the North American context (and therefore only minimally includes discussion on the Middle East). The current Jewish-Christian dialogue table was initiated in May 2004 and has had a specific and deliberate focus on the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This dialogue setting has involved discussion on topics such as the importance Israel-Palestine has for each community, the different narratives each community brings, theology of covenant, Christian Zionism, and divestment. The participants, representing a variety of Christian churches (the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church,) and Jewish organizations (the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, B'Nai B'Rith International, the Jewish Committee for Public Affairs) have also traveled together to Jerusalem and Israel/Palestine (September 2005) to encounter the issue first-hand and together, with important engagement with our respective partners there.

With the Jewish community, perhaps the most contentious discussion has been over what has been described and framed as “divestment.” Some of the churches have adopted policies calling for the use of positive contributions/investments; advocacy efforts to reduce US military spending in the region as whole, preferring to redirect such allocations for peace-building and development efforts; corporate engagement with US companies profiting from the perpetuation of violence in the Middle East, or the possibility of divestment from such companies, or a combination of these tactics. None of these approaches has targeted Israel or its economy, but rather have focused both on violence and occupation. While the use of “economic leverage” to promote peacemaking in the Middle East have clearly focused on ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, these actions by the churches have sometimes been misunderstood as actions against Israel specifically. It is important to understand the difference, and to comprehend the intent of the actions.



Christian Zionism

While only a limited percentage of evangelical Christians describe themselves as “Christian Zionists,” those pre-millennial dispensationalists who support Israel out of a particular reading of Scripture are influential. Some evangelical pastors such as the Rev. John Hagee give unconditional support to Israel and its policies because they see the Middle East conflict as part of the end times, and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Such a reading ignores Jesus’ teaching that believers will not know when that time is coming; plays on support for Israel and Jews when the final battle of Armageddon results in the conversion of Jews to Christ or their death; and discounts the authentic witness and presence of a viable Christian community in the Middle East, whose presence is threatened by such violent and exclusivist claims. The National Council of Churches has released information about Christian Zionism that may be helpful [<http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/christianzionismbrochure.pdf>]. Besides the theological issues Christian Zionism raises, the US policy implications of Christian Zionism have had dangerous effects on efforts to push forward with negotiations and agreement on peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It is also important to note that a coalition of prominent evangelicals in the US support just peace in the Middle East and have rejected Christian Zionism.

US Churches and Advocacy Coalitions

The US churches are actively engaged in advocacy efforts on issues throughout the world. Because of our long ties to the churches in the region and our commitments to justice and peace, such advocacy naturally includes the complex issues of the Middle East. To that end, most major US churches participate in efforts together. Such work is undertaken by individual churches and ecumenically, both with the National Council of Churches and with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. Efforts also have expanded to include US evangelicals who support Middle East peace and rights of Palestinians.

Two efforts are highlighted here:

Churches for Middle East Peace [www.cmep.org]

Founded in 1984, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) is a Washington, DC-based advocacy coalition that includes 22 churches, including Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and the historic Peace Churches (Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers). Efforts by CMEP to keep the issue of US involvement in bringing about peace between Israelis and Palestinians have been consistent and focus on a negotiated solution to the conflict that results in a two-state solution, a shared and accessible Jerusalem, recognition and preservation of the rights of all people (including refugees), and demilitarization of the region, among others.

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative [www.nili-mideastpeace.org]



The unique character of the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (NILI) derives from the active involvement of leaders from the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—to promote an engaged US role in negotiating peace with Israelis and Palestinians. Now just over five years old, under the leadership of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick NILI participants meet occasionally with US Administration officials to assert the commonly agreed import, based on the teachings of the three faiths—each of which has ties to the religious communities of the Middle East—of ending violence and ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution, through engaged US leadership.

Concern for Diminishing Christian Presence in the Region

Christians in the Middle East are a small, but vital, segment of the population. Their relative size varies from country to country (from more than 30% in Lebanon to roughly 10% in Egypt, 2% in Israel/Palestine, and less than 1% in Iran and Turkey). Almost half of the Middle East's 15 million Christians are Egyptian, due to the large size of the population and the history of Christianity in the country. The Christians of each country in the region trace their roots back to the first century of Christianity. In Israel/Palestine, of course, the Christian community dates back to the first followers of Jesus and the establishment of the first Church. Today, the population is slightly under 2% of the population, all of whom are Arab Christians. They are a part of the Palestinian community, and feel the impact of Israeli policies of occupation just as their Muslim neighbors do.

Due to emigration, there is much fear that the Christian population of the region will diminish to next to nothing in the next decades, thus ending the continuous presence of Christianity in the region dating back two millennia. The churches of the Middle East are acutely aware of this reality, and are attempting to ensure the future of the Christians in the region against difficult odds. The impact of US policy in the region, which most recently has waged war in Iraq and has continued to support the Israeli occupation in Palestinian Territories, affects the Christian population as local Christians are falsely associated with the policies of a perceived “Christian” West. This is among the factors that lead to marginalization of Christians and push them to seek opportunities elsewhere. Efforts to support justice and peace for all people would benefit the entire region, and would have an additional benefit to the Christian community.

Conclusion

While the issues of the Middle East, and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are complex, the extensive ties and relationships US churches have in the region—and our interfaith engagement both in the Middle East and in the US—help us to understand them through an authentic and realistic lens. The temptation to frame such conflict in religious terms would be to succumb to oversimplification; basic political issues must be resolved. Even so, the role of religious leadership and communities can be helpful in understanding the complexities from human, economic and socio-political perspectives. Such



relationships help us to focus on the right of all people to live in a sovereign and territorially contiguous state with recognized, viable and secure boundaries, and the right of all people to live free from fear of attack or of violence in any form. Such rights cannot be sacrificed to an easier course of promoting economic development without ensuring a political and social context that is conducive to such development, free from conflict and war. Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to the well-being of all the people directly impacted, and is in the interest of the US to work to ensure such a resolution. Religious communities—particularly Jews, Christians, and Muslims—worldwide would welcome such a role, and the US churches, which have long supported a just resolution, would be at the forefront of those celebrating such a peace in the land called “holy.”

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