

*The following document is one of several critical responses to “Perspectives on Presbyterian Church (USA) Support for a Just and Peaceful Compromise of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” issued as a discussion paper on May 9, 2014, by the Ecumenical and Interreligious Work Group (EIWG) of the Presbytery of Chicago.*

RESPONSE:

## Friends of Sabeel – North America

**Background:** FOSNA is a North American organization that supports the theological perspective and various advocacy efforts of Sabeel: Jerusalem, the voice of the Palestinian Christians, in their quest for peace based on justice and eventual reconciliation. While FOSNA’s focus is North America, we work with Friends of Sabeel organizations in several European countries and Australia. The context of Palestinian Christians, a tiny minority, is critical which leads us to prioritize our relationships with a variety of Jewish, Muslim, and secular peace and justice organizations in the Holy Land and internationally. We have great interest, therefore, in this opportunity to respond to your document with the hope that our suggestions will enable you to move the conversation forward and embrace a vision for authentic peace based on justice for all in the Holy Land.

### **Suggestions for a New Framework**

1. While FOSNA commends the basic intentions of the EIWG document we are not able to endorse it at this time due to the narrow framing of its core theological and political arguments. We find several conflicts with our theological values and political analysis that fail to make this a document that will move the difficult conversation forward. Moreover, we are concerned there are several elements in the present document could be used to justify certain ethical and religious claims that support a continuation of the Israeli military occupation and could accelerate division. We are concerned that several important interfaith and even key secular partners are locked out of this discussion. We call for a constructive reconsideration of the framing of the document and offer the suggestions below for your consideration.
2. A first step toward a more inclusive framing of the present document would be the inclusion of quotations from the Qur’an, New Testament, and Hebrew scriptures that embrace justice, mercy, peace, and reconciliation for all the people of the Holy Land. From a theological perspective, reconciliation entails justice or it is “cheap” and will not endure. Psalm 85 states: “Let us hear what God the Lord will speak, for (God) will speak peace to the people: “Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; justice (righteousness) and peace kiss each other.” (verses 8a & 10). The movement of steadfast love (“Chesed”) and faithfulness must pass through justice and eventually reconciliation can be reached. Reconciliation is often the most difficult the last stage of peace-building, as seen in Rwanda and South Africa. Let’s open this up at the outset to potential Muslim and several Jewish partners.
3. The present document is still trapped in what seems to be a dated narrative as a basic assumption running through the paper is the present power imbalance in the Israeli-Palestinian debate. EIWG seems willing to meet the demands of the Jewish establishment organizations and their supporters in various denominations at risk of including the fastest growing sector of both Jewish and Muslim communities working on justice and peace. The failure of the recent Kerry initiative and intentional statements by Kerry himself and his assistant Martin Indyk were signals the old narrative is coming to an end, and may have died some time ago. Kerry invoking the word “Apartheid” and Indyk laying blame on Israel’s settlement acceleration are signs the administration, despite its many concessions to Israel, is opening themselves to a new framework. The churches should be out front as the prophetic voices for justice and peace for both Israelis and Palestinians, rather than lagging behind.
4. You reject issues that for us and our partner organizations provide legitimate political and theological analyses of Israel and the ideology of Revisionist and Ultra-Orthodox Zionism. This includes the critique of political and theological “exceptionalism,” settler colonialism as an ideology and practice today, the right of return for both people, and Christian Zionism within our varied theological traditions. These are vital theological debates where we need not agree but can be conducted with sensitivity and truthfulness. Moreover, engaging in these issues

broadens the circle of potential interfaith and secular partners, particularly among youth and minority populations, which the former “dialogue” are sadly missing. Closing the circle to the Jewish and Christian establishment, what many call the guardians of the “ecumenical deal,” misses not only these populations. We are discovering a new dialogue of justice and hope EIWG will be open to consider it.

5. We agree that the present course of Israel is “unsustainable,” and evidence is in such findings as a 2012 BBC World Service poll that ranked Israel third from the bottom as the least popular countries in the world. At the core of Israel’s problem is the failure to resolve the Palestine question in a just and peaceful manner. Out of concern for our Jewish friends we believe tough love is in order, which includes focused political criticism (which is not anti-Semitism or illegitimate) and economic leveraging. The latter worked with Gandhi in India, also in South Africa and in the US with the civil rights struggle. When a nation like Israel is protected by the major power in the world and relatively immune from political criticism, we join Palestinian civil society in the use of legitimate non-violent strategies to effect political change. Sabeel-Jerusalem is part of over 170 Palestinian organizations that embrace BDS and FOSNA finds it consistent to join them. We find it a double standard that Israel and its lobby in the US practices BDS (Gaza sanctions among many examples) but deny it to Palestinians.

5. We have a long list of specific suggestions for improvement that broaden the narrative for broader inclusion in the discussion. To name a few:

- The tragic history of the Jewish people is vital and must be honored but you fail to mention the Nakba/ Catastrophe of the Palestinians of 1948-49 (which continues today). Acknowledgement of this historical fact is essential to include broader Palestinian and Muslim representation.
- It isn’t helpful to state the 1947 Partition plan was “not embraced by the wider Arab world” unless you provide historical and political context. Palestinians were 66% of the population, owned over 90% of the land, yet were offered 45-46% for their state (minus the prime agricultural and coastal areas). To state Palestinians were “displaced” softens what the Zionist leadership achieved by depopulating half the Palestinian population through the Dalet Plan. Moreover, to blame the Nakba on the Palestinians (and Arab neighbors., p.4) is the flawed “blame the victims” problem. Your page 10 states “mass forced expulsions of Jews,” but should use the clause with the Nakba.
- Change the word “Ambiguity” (p.4-5) to Paradoxes, or something similar. You suggest that we do not live in an ideal world, but this begs the question that there is clear historical analysis and a body of international law, both of which are ignored by all sides to this conflict. State the historical facts and then the international law or principles of theological ethics and hold them in tension. Israel has the “right of return;” Palestinians have been granted that right in the United Nations but Israel and the United States reject it (for demographic and political reasons). Or Israel claims it is a “Jewish democracy,” (ideal) but does the reality inside Israel for African asylum seekers match the claim?

5. Much of the “Realism” section is useful but reinforces the myth that this is a balanced issue with two equal sides. You should note this has never been the case in this conflict. Israel is the most powerful military and only nuclear power in the Middle East and is capable of defeating any and all Arab countries. In this context, in 1988 the Palestinian Nat’l Council accepted Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign state within the pre-67 borders (also in 1992, and repeatedly thereafter); Israel has yet to grant political rights and self-determination with land contiguity to Palestinians on the 23% of Palestine that remained. This basis for a 2 state solution has now vanished with the settlement industry and other occupation strategies.

6. A serious flaw occurs on p. 10 where you list the terrorist threats facing Israel: Iran, Hizbollah, instability in the Arab regimes, missiles fired from Gaza: all dealing with violence. Yet in the same section you reject BDS, theological and political criticism of Zionism, etc., all legitimate practices of free speech and non-violent methods.

7. Current Realities: Israel: is currently dated by not recognizing the Fatah-Hamas unity agreements of this month which may be a hopeful sign concerning the power imbalance for Palestinians and potential for changes in the Hamas charter. This should be viewed as a constructive step, not demonized.

8. The two state arguments should be nuanced, particularly now in the post-Oslo era. Why not list several options to be on the table and open up the discussion/narrative?

9. For further information, add B'Tselem; Sabeel and Friends of Sabeel:North America; Al-Haq, Save the Children, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP's response to the paper should be included if they so desire).