

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:

American Muslims for Palestine

The American Muslims for Palestine (AMP) is a national, grassroots organization whose mission is to educate the American public about issues related to Palestine and its rich cultural and historical heritage. We are an American organization, working for Americans in America. We are an organization open to all who share our perspective on Palestine and who are committed to forwarding the Palestinian narrative, which is all but absent from the national discourse in the government and media.

AMP is also a firm believer in coalition building, especially interfaith work with Jews and Christians who share the same goals of human rights and upholding international law. Therefore, we were delighted when the Ecumenical Interreligious Working Group of the Presbytery of Chicago contacted us for input on their document, “Perspectives on Presbyterian Church USA Support for a Just and Peaceful Compromise of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”

Despite sharing with EIWG our grave concerns over the draft document and discussing the Muslim and Palestinian perspective relative to those concerns, we are dismayed to see a position paper that continues to forward the Zionist narrative, that does not recognize the peaceful Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement as a way to encourage Israel to abide by international law, and that at times holds Palestinians responsible for their own plight without taking into consideration the context of the world’s longest-standing military occupation and how it governs every aspect of Palestinian life. The document also is framed primarily within the Christian context without allowing safe space for interfaith partners; e.g., without also utilizing passages about justice from the texts holy to Jews and Muslims.

Therefore, keeping in mind the tenets of our faith, upholding the values of justice, liberty and human rights, and in consideration of our longstanding interfaith relationships with other socially justice-minded Jews, Muslims and Christians, AMP cannot in good conscience support, sign on to or in any other way endorse the discussion paper in its current form. We do not wish our statement to be amended to the EIWG position paper.

AMP commends the EIWG for taking on the issue of Palestine and for attempting to right a wrong that has been continuing for decades. However, we find the paper perpetuates an old, increasingly outdated framework that is biased toward Israel and asks Palestinians to guarantee the security of their oppressor. It says the “current situation is intolerable for Palestinians,” without once holding Israel accountable for frequent international law violations and for depriving Palestinians of their most basic human rights.

AMP’s mission to educate the public is done so with the goal of creating a grassroots movement that eventually will persuade Congress to develop a more fair and balanced foreign policy that affords equal rights to everyone living in the Middle East. Assuring human rights for one group does not take away human rights from another. That is why we find the EIWG’s document so hurtful and problematic and not in keeping with today’s more robust interfaith work being done for Palestine. Nevertheless, we are writing this response statement in the great hope we could help the EIWG to reconsider its positions, broaden the scope of its work and move toward interfaith work based on honesty, integrity, transparency, human rights and international law. This response is written in good faith and with the best of intentions.

Unequal narratives?

From the start, the EIWG seems to be repeating the old-guard Zionist narrative, starting with the history of Palestine, which is hurtful and problematic to some of the very people it hopes to engage in continuing interfaith

work. In the section titled, “Tragedy,” the EIWG recognizes Jews’ connection to Palestine but negates Palestinian heritage, which dates back to the Canaanites. The Old Testament event mentions Palestinians when it mentions the “Philistines” in the story of David and Goliath.

Consider the way these two phrases are worded: “For Israeli Jews – for whom Israel is their homeland...” compared to “For the Palestinian people – the indigenous people who call historic Palestine their homeland...” This construct diminishes the Palestinian narrative while affirming the Zionist one. The authors present the Zionist claim as a statement of fact by using the word ‘is,’ but question Palestinians’ claim by using the word, ‘call.’ In other words, the construct invariably implies that just because Palestinians call Palestine their homeland does not make it so. In addition, the sentence simply does not make sense. How can the authors name Palestinians as the “indigenous people” on one hand and refute their heritage on the other? The very definition of indigenous is ‘originating or occurring naturally in a particular place.’ This discrepancy in terminology creates a feeling of mistrust and is actually hurtful to the very people EIWG hopes to work with on the issue of Palestine and Israel. AMP asserts this is anathema to legitimate interfaith work and instead is an attempt to appease Zionist Jewish organizations, whose real goal is to maintain the status quo in Palestine and Israel.

Interfaith work

AMP is also highly concerned with EIWG’s refusal to allow our interfaith partner Jewish Voice for Peace to play a role in the shaping of this document. We are concerned that instead of working with American Jews who advocate for human rights and international law, the EIWG may be aligning itself with old-guard Zionist Jewish organizations.

Contrary to what the Jewish Federation has asserted in the past, it is not the voice of the “organized Jewish community,” says Jewish Voice for Peace. According to a Pew Research Study on American Jews released in October 2013, 82 percent of American Jews are more apt to stand with human rights and international law and freely criticize Israeli policy. This group also is less apt to accept that “God gave the land to the Jews,” the Washington Post reports.

What these figures tell us is that there is a great divide in the American Jewish community and those who support Israel in its current form are diminishing in number and more apt to turn away from Zionism, according to journalist Peter Beinart, author of “The Crisis of Zionism.”

The Jewish Federation, the Jewish Community Resource Council and other organizations that support the status quo in Israel, namely the military occupation and Israel’s continual violation of international law and denial of Palestinian human rights, have concerted initiatives to co-opt Christian and Muslim voices on the issue of Palestine. These initiatives are the Israel Advocacy Initiative and the Israel Action Network. They have publicly bragged about how they stopped Presbyterian divestment efforts in the past. The Federation and JCRC also spend millions of dollars on efforts like the Israel Advocacy Initiative to garner continued congressional support for Israel by first establishing relationships with other faith groups. With such relationships in place, Zionist Jewish groups are ensuring that Israel will never be held accountable for its violations of international law and human rights abuses and that Congress will never create a more fair and balanced foreign policy in the Middle East that affords equal rights to everyone who lives there, regardless of faith, creed or heritage. By partnering with the Jewish Federation and other Zionist organizations, the EIWG could very well alienate those of us who could be allies in the struggle for justice.

The Federation claims to have stopped divestment efforts: “IAI (Israel Advocacy Initiative) has already made an impact, countering anti-Israel divestment initiatives within mainline Protestant churches, on college campuses and in city councils. Our system can and is making a difference,” according to the IAI website, which states further that the JCRC accomplishes these goals by “mobilizing communities to intensify their interfaith and inter-group dialogue.”

On the other side comes the 2005 Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in response to the utter lack of diplomatic, political and financial pressure on Israel to abide by international law. More than 170 Palestinian civil society, trade unions and political organizations signed onto the call. BDS is a peaceful, nonviolent means to affect change. BDS successfully ended apartheid in South Africa and it can do the same in Palestine and Israel.

AMP wholly supports efforts within the Presbyterian Church to divest from Israel.

The BDS movement has never called for the destruction of Israel as its opponents have claimed. In fact, its mission statement is focused on a rights-based approach in attempt to get Israel to abide by international law:

The campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) is shaped by a rights-based approach and highlights the three broad sections of the Palestinian people: the refugees, those under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Palestinians in Israel. The call urges various forms of boycott against Israel until it meets its obligations under international law by:

- Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall;
- Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
- Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

Anti-Palestinian language

The EIWG document is fraught with problems and inaccuracies and we are not able to discuss all of them within the scope of this paper. However, because this document is put forward under the auspices of an interreligious group with a desire for interfaith cooperation, AMP feels it necessary to point out passages that are hurtful to Palestinians and Muslims and that seem to highlight an underlying lack of understanding of the Palestinian situation.

The EIWG tries to evoke understanding by stating the situation for Palestinians is ‘intolerable.’ However, subsequent passages contradict this by intimating Palestinians themselves are inherently ‘dangerous’ to Israeli citizens, by criticizing the ineffectiveness of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas governments without taking into account the context of the role the United States, Israel and the occupation, and the European Union play in undermining them and their unity; and by stating that Palestinians must not only recognize the “Jewish Democratic state of Israel” but must also recognize the “right” of the “Jewish Democratic state of Israel,” to exist.

Unfortunately, the EIWG forwards an inherently anti-Palestinian and possibly Islamophobic position by stating, “Palestinians in the West Bank, and especially Gaza, have posed a real security threat to Israeli citizens, though not to the existence of Israel as a nation state.” In other words, the paper is forwarding the Zionist, Islamophobic propaganda that Palestinians are inherently violent people. This propaganda was picked up recently by noted Islamophobe, Pamela Geller, founder of the American Freedom Defense Initiative, which the Southern Poverty Law Center has named a hate group. Geller ran bus ads that stated, “In the war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel.” In effect, Geller’s ad was adapting the Zionist narrative of the Palestinians as savage, or violent, people. Putting aside that international law affords an occupied people the right to resist that occupation by any means necessary, EIWG’s position is inaccurate at best and racist at worst.

Let’s consider some actual facts. Israel disengaged from Gaza in September 2005 by removing its military and settlers. In the 12 months between September 2005 and September 2006, armed Palestinian groups fired 1,700 homemade rockets into Israel, injuring 41 Israelis. During that same time period, Israel launched 550 airstrikes and fired 15,000 artillery shells into Gaza, killing 525 Palestinians and injuring 1,527.

Looking at the numbers another way, between June 9 and Nov. 25, 2006, Israel killed 85 Palestinian children in Gaza, according to a report by the Swiss-based human rights organization Defence for Children International.

According to the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, Israeli occupation forces have killed more than 6,300 Palestinians since Sept. 29, 2000, including more than 1,500 children, reported the Israeli newspapers, the Jerusalem Post and Haaretz. During the same time period slightly more than 1,000 Israelis were killed, including 124 children. This is a ratio of 6:1. The fact the EIWG paper does not recognize this gross disproportionality is egregious.

The paper also does not recognize the very real threat the Israeli military and illegal Jewish settlers pose to Palestinian life. For instance, Jewish settler “price tag” attacks are acts of vandalism or violence perpetrated against Palestinian children, shepherds, villagers and city-dwellers, Muslim and Christians alike. Both mosques

and churches have been vandalized and burned down. The US State Department calls these price tag attacks 'terrorism' in its 2013 global report on terrorism. Between 2007 and 2011, Jewish settler attacks increased by 315 percent, the Jewish Daily Forward reports.

To be sure, AMP asserts that all people have the inherent right to live in peace and security. But the EIWG does not afford Palestinians the same rights. In fact, it disregards this right when it holds all Palestinians accountable for a few but fails to hold the Israeli military and Jewish settlers accountable. The EIWG fails the Palestinians when it says they pose a real threat to Israeli citizens when it is clearly not true. And the EIWG fails Palestinians when it does not recognize the disproportionality of deaths and violence that exists. Where is the recognition that the Israeli military and Jewish settlers kill exponentially more Palestinians than Palestinians kill Israelis? AMP does not like to engage in 'tit-for-tat' arguments when it comes to violence and we hold that all civilian life is sacrosanct. However, we point out these statistics and the sheer disproportionality as a way to illustrate the weakness in the EIWG position. This lack of honesty calls the entire EIWG work into question.

Furthermore, it is unfortunate the paper holds Palestinians responsible for their own plight and the failure of their governments in the West Bank and Gaza without discussing this within the context of the occupation and the role that it and Israel, the United States and the European Union play. It is widely known that Hamas won a fair and open democratic election in 2006. It is also known that the unity government Hamas formed with Fatah failed after the United States and European Union withheld financial support at the request of Israel. US foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority largely supports the PA security forces, which are used to enforce Israel's military occupation policies in the West Bank, according to the Congressional Research Service. Despite the creation of the PA after the Oslo Peace Accords, Israel still controls every aspect of Palestinian life. The ineffectiveness of the PA and Hamas to govern and rule are a direct result of all these influences, facts completely ignored in the EIWG paper. Finally, the EIWG asserts there can be no peace unless Palestinians recognize the right of a "Jewish Democratic state of Israel" to exist. There are two equally gross problems with this statement. First, the term 'Jewish Democratic' is an oxymoron. How can democracy exist when rights are afforded based upon religion or ethnicity? Second, there is a huge difference between recognizing the existence of Israel and the right of a Jewish Democratic state to exist. The first is a given. Israel exists and has been recognized by countries around the world. Both the PLO and the PA recognize the existence of Israel.

Using the language 'right to exist,' turns this from a political argument into a moral one. In the words of the Veritas Papers, a primer for activists: "This would imply that Israel's founding and colonialism was not only justified, but it was their moral right to displace almost one million Palestinians, and massacre thousands of others. The phrase requires thought, and implies that Israel not only exists, but that it has the moral right to exist. Furthermore, Israel demands that everyone in the world recognize this supposed right. This is unlike any other state. After all, even Canada and America have not demanded that their indigenous population recognize their "right" to exist. ... Further, Israel is perhaps the only country in the world not to have defined borders. So, on what borders is Israel being recognized?"

Conclusion

As stated in the EIWG paper, Jews, Muslims and Christians had lived together for generations in peace and prosperity in Palestine. AMP asserts the "conflict" today is not a religious one; rather, it is a political one that dates back to the United Nations partition of Palestine in 1947. The partition came about after decades of undue Zionist influence. Zionism came to the fore in the 1800s, particularly after the publication of Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl's book, "Der Judenstaat," or The Jewish State. Zionism has at its core the call for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people from Palestine.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion said in 1944, "The concept of 'transferring' European Jews to Palestine and 'transferring' the Palestinian people out is central to Zionism." Furthermore, the late Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon said in 1998, "... there is no Zionism, colonization, or Jewish State without the eviction of the Arabs and the expropriation of their lands."

Yet despite this history, there is still hope that justice will come to the Palestinians and all people in the Holy Land will be able to live together in peace and security.

In good faith and with high hopes for future cooperative working arrangements, AMP implores the EIWG to

reconsider its positions, continue to educate itself on the issues and to consider joining the ever-growing, forward-facing interfaith coalition that bases its work on human rights, justice and international law.

For more information, please reach out to AMP, Friends of Sabeel-North America, Defence for Children International – Palestine Section, Badil, Addameer, B'Tselem, Al-Haq, United Nations Relief and Works Agency, Jewish Voice for Peace, and the Israel Palestine Mission Network.

This statement is available online at:

<http://www.ampalestine.org/index.php/newsroom/articles/563-american-muslim-for-palestine-s-response-to-eiwg-s-position-paper-on-palestine-israel>