

*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:

## Talat Othman

*President, Metropolitan-Based Investment Management Firm*

First, allow me to congratulate the Presbyterian Church for initiating and acting on supporting ways to bring about a just and final solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—or more accurately, the occupation of Palestinian land as described by the plethora of U.N. Resolutions and International Law.

My comments seek to address the rationale underlying this discussion paper: “The current situation is intolerable for the Palestinians and unsustainable for the Israelis.”

More than that, it should be “unacceptable” even if it was sustainable. It would still be wrong. Decisions were made for the two peoples involved. The world, through the United Nations, created the situation and the United Nations must resolve it.

How can a weak party dealing with a party having total control over them—and supported by a major power, right or wrong—negotiate? Particularly when the strong party continues to absorb more and more of their land and creating irreversible facts on the ground? The Presbyterian Church should follow the only path that will work: seek truth and justice, and then peace will follow.

Forty years ago, a negotiated settlement could have been done. Today, it is too late. One side continues to take, while the other side has nothing left to give. The Presbyterian Church can be most constructive by publicly stating the truth, then pronouncing a just solution, based on the teachings of the Church, international law, the Geneva Conventions, and all that civilized society calls for. Then, and only then, will there be reconciliation and peace.

There are realities on the ground. But those realities continue to increase unabated, thus creating more obstacles to overcome. At some point, one has to say those realities were created by human beings, and consequently have to be overturned by human beings. While I appreciate looking at each party’s narrative, there is a point when one’s narrative may be more fiction, or paranoia, than real. It should not have the same weight as the real situation.

For example, insisting that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a state for the Jewish People. According to a local Israeli official, this translates into the reality that Israel will always have a Jewish majority. How can that be accomplished without restricting the birth and citizenship of Christians and Muslims? It is apartheid by another name.

I applaud the authors of this paper. They have examined every aspect of the situation as seen through the eyes of the Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims, and Christians. The time comes for a discussion. As Secretary Kerry has said, every aspect of this problem has been discussed, negotiated from Oslo to Taba to now. There are no unknowns left; only knowns.

Former Prime Minister Olmert said that he could have had an agreement if he had three more months to negotiate with President Abbas. He did not have three months because he was indicted for bribery and on the way out of office. He stated clearly that President Abbas did not say no. He did not say yes, because it was known that Prime Minister Olmert could not deliver at that time.

The right solution, as everyone knows, and has known for a long time, as Prime Minister Olmert stated:

security for Israel can only come through peace.

Peace with two states; East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine; the Holy Shrines administered by Palestinians, Israelis, Jordanians, Saudis, and Americans; borders based on 1967 lines with under 5% land swaps of equal size and quality; refugees to be compensated with a nominal number coming back (for purposes of family reunification) over a 10-year period.

Additionally, if Israel wishes further security, then a demilitarized Palestine, with US or NATO troops monitoring both sides of the borders.

Palestinians need security as well. This means withdrawal of Israeli troops over a three-year period but immediately from areas B&C, allowing for people and goods to move freely in and out of Palestine in order to develop an economy and move away from third-country donations.

The Palestinians are giving up 78% of the original Palestine. They are giving up their legal right to the return of refugees. Palestinians are willing to settle for much less than they are entitled to by International law and the U.N. Resolutions. Israel is not giving up anything that they are entitled to by either international law or the UN Resolutions that created it.

I understand the rationale used. However, it justifies what is not justifiable by law and civilized society. Consequently, looking for a politically correct way out takes decades. Meanwhile, over time, with the worsening of the situation, there will be nothing left to negotiate over.

I commend the Presbyterian Church for having the courage to even give voice to the Palestinian narrative. I realize the pressure they are under from some sources. Yet if the Church wants to live by its teachings then it has to stand up, even if it is the only one standing. On the other hand, their stand may encourage others to stand as well. Understandably this is easier said than done.

What can the Church do?

- Implement a public information program based on facts and justice, as they know it.
- Provide information on political candidates supporting these positions and those who oppose them (while falling short of endorsing specific candidates).
- Conduct tours, youth programs, visits to the Holy Land, so that church members can see for themselves what is happening.
- Invest in Palestine with similar amounts as invested in Israel and encourage members to do the same.
- Disinvest from U.S. and Israeli companies doing business in the settlements or with settlers. This is not anti-Semitic; rather, this is choosing not to do business with those that the US government considers illegal. All settlements are illegal under US and International law. Support those groups, NGOs, companies, institutions that practice this type of boycott. Boycott programs worked to end apartheid in South Africa.

These are some bold suggestions which will bring the wrath of the lobbies and certain groups in the Church. But if the church shies away from that, then it is not practicing what it preaches. On the other hand, if it stands up, it will be admired and supported by many for living out its beliefs and acting for what it deems to be right.

The faith communities are continuously criticized for NOT standing up for what was right in the 1940s.

I wish you well and thank you for undertaking this very sensitive situation that is crying out for resolution.

This statement is available online at:

<http://www.chicagopresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/perspectives-on-pcusa-support-for-just-and-peaceful-compromise.pdf>