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ISRAEL/PALESTINE MISSION NETWORK of the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, U.S.A.

peacemaking through partnerships, education and advocacy

An Open Letter on Palestinian Statehood from Presbyterian Christians in the United States
September 21, 2011

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States

Dear Mr. President:

We write this open letter to confirm support within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for statehood for Palestine and hence for the admission of the state of Palestine into membership of the United Nations. We believe the admission of Palestine—currently a permanent observer—into full membership will hasten progress toward the two-state solution affirmed by international law and will contribute to a just peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. The General Assemblies of our church have long supported the two-state solution and an end to the Israeli military occupation; this letter allows a broad spectrum of our members to affirm this position, which we base in Jesus Christ’s prophetic call for us to be peacemakers and the call of Palestinian Christian partners. Thus we encourage all nations to support Palestinian self-determination on questions related to UN membership. If a nation cannot vote Yes for its own considerations, we ask that its representatives abstain and not deny the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, nor withhold financial support for the Palestinian people to overcome decades of restrictions on their freedom and development.

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We understand the view expressed by United States and Israeli representatives that international recognition by the UN is no substitute for two-party, two-state negotiations. But the reverse is also true, given the prolonged and undeniable failure of the negotiations between parties of vastly different power since the Oslo accords of 1993. In fact, affirmation of Palestinian membership in the United Nations would seem to increase the likelihood of fair and transparent two party negotiations before a watching world.

As General David Petraeus indicated to the US Congress in 2009, the lack of a just peace in Palestine engenders insecurity and hostility to the United States, Israel and the West generally, particularly in Arab and Muslim nations. We oppose all violence in Israel and Palestine, by both the occupier and the occupied, and see ending the occupation itself as the right path to ending both structural and reactive violence, terror and discrimination.

The principle of democratic self-determination by peoples is fundamental to a just international order. In particular, the Geneva Convention dating from the Nuremberg trials in 1949, that land acquired in war should not be annexed and subjected to population settlement or removal, is a bulwark against nations seeking to expand their territory by force of arms. UN membership will not solve all statehood issues, but it offers a firmer platform for future resolution than unequal and infinite negotiation. Our rationale accompanies this letter, but the core principle is that the Palestinians have a right to freedom in their own viable and democratic state.

In closing, we reaffirm our support for Palestine and Israel, living in a peace that goes beyond the absence of hostilities to include an embrace of full human rights and economic equity for all citizens of both countries. Thus will they both be fully welcome within the family of nations.

Sincerely,

The Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
info@theIPMN.org

and the undersigned Presbyterians from around the United States,

[attachment of signatures]

RATIONALE ON PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD AND UNITED NATIONS MEMBERSHIP

The key issue:

Many conflicting statements have been made concerning the legality, appropriateness and consequences of the Palestinian Authority (PA) or the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO, authorized representative of the Palestinian people) requesting membership from the United Nations' Security Council or UN General Assembly. Many nations have already recognized Palestine as a state; the action under consideration is what status of membership Palestine may be granted, whether an upgrade of its observer status to that of a non-member state, or full membership. The most recent Presbyterian social policy statement on the Middle East, "Breaking Down the Walls" (2010), continues the support of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assemblies for Palestinian statehood and expresses grave concern that the two-state solution window nears closure.

Previous United Nations actions related to statehood for Palestine:

The question of standing for a Palestinian entity can be taken back to the initial UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947 which recommended a partition of Palestine into two states. The original UN partition plan was 56% to Israel, 43% to Palestine, with 1% for Jerusalem and Bethlehem as an international zone. After hostilities before and following the declaration of Israel as a state on May 14, 1948, Israel's de facto borders were the armistice lines of July 20, 1949, by which it had 78% of the former British Mandate, with Jordan and others holding the remaining 22%. This 22% includes areas of historic Palestinian population density: East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

Security Council Resolution 242 of November, 1967, adopted after the Six Day War, maintains that Israel should withdraw to those 1949 borders, the "green line," in the exchange of land for peace. Since this Resolution effectively reduces the size of a potential Palestine by half, Palestinians resisted accepting an approximation of these boundaries until the effective recognition of Israel by the PLO in 1988 and the further use of these lines under the Oslo agreement. Thus the "67 borders" reflect the "49 armistice line," and the long-running failed negotiations mean that Israel's military has controlled the entire territory since 1967. Israel's own borders, then, have never been formally declared nor internationally recognized; nor have negotiations agreed on Jerusalem, refugees, security, etc.

The Settlements, Annexation of land, and Occupation:

Since the mid 1970's, Presbyterian General Assemblies have opposed the unilateral construction of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, now totaling over 300,000 persons in the West Bank and 200,000 in East Jerusalem. These settlements and their exclusionary infrastructure (e.g. Israeli-only roads), supported by Israel's government, are the greatest threat to the viability of a Palestinian state. As in Hebron, they are also a source of violence and daily tension. Although US media do not regularly cover human rights in the Occupied Territories, Al Jazeera and other international channels provide steady coverage to much of the rest of the world. This flow of information has been essential to the Arab Awakening, after which public opinion in the Arab street has mattered. Although the Palestinian Authority receives \$550 million from the US and other international aid, the World Bank, which affirms Palestinian organizational readiness for statehood, notes that the occupation blocks growth.

The United States Security Council Veto and other support for Israel:

The US Government has used its veto 41 times over the years to defend Israel's occupation and military actions, and has indicated that it will use it again on the membership question. The US taxpayer provides \$3.5 billion per year to the Israeli government, effectively helping subsidize the occupation. These facts make it difficult to claim that the United States can be an honest broker in negotiations. Thus we see the United Nations as a necessary third party and right venue for justice, and representative of international conscience and law.

Palestinian Unity and Representation:

Fatah and Hamas are not the only political bodies representing Palestinians, but they are the largest and have united in pursuing statehood. Advances in unity and forbearance deserve encouragement. Like several Israeli political parties that deny Palestine's right to exist and favor further expulsion of Arabs, extremist positions can be found on both sides but should not be taken as excuses to derail a substantial opportunity for peace with some measure of justice.

Other resources: Security Council Report 25 July 2011 No. 1 www.securitycouncilreport.org
"Dilemmas and Opportunities Facing the Palestinian People," Sept. 5, 2011 media@sabeel.org
Khaled Elgindy, "Palestine Goes to the UN," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2011 ForeignAffairs.org or Brookings.edu