

Statement on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Peace Process

28 June 2016

He has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2.14)

During this year – 2016 – the ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace focuses on the Middle East – the birthplace of some of the earliest human civilizations and of three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and especially on Israel and Palestine, the land of Our Lord Jesus Christ’s birth, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. Our living faith has its roots in this land, nourished and nurtured by the unbroken witness of the local churches who have their own roots in apostolic times.

We are called during this year to reflect together on the situation of the churches and societies of this region, the threatened presence and witness of Christians throughout the Middle East, and on the long and unfulfilled search for peace with justice for Israelis and Palestinians, noting that next year – 2017 – will mark a painful anniversary: 50 years since Israel began its occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

Throughout this period, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has sought to promote a durable solution out of a conviction that churches are duty bound to pray and work for an outcome as just as may be in the midst of our human disorder, recognizing that so long as underlying injustice persists there can be neither peace nor security for either Israelis or Palestinians.

Norms of international law and practice that bear upon this situation – relating to the conduct of armed conflict, protection of civilians, responsibilities and constraints upon an occupying power, the peaceful resolution of conflict, self-determination and human rights – have been so routinely ignored in the past decades that international law and international multilateral organizations have been undermined and weakened.

In the midst of violence and division, the ecumenical movement seeks to offer a word of hope, faith and love, encouraging and supporting actions for peace with justice. The WCC has maintained a consistent hope-filled objective and prayer – for equal justice for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Such hopes have risen and fallen with the fortunes of the intermittent ‘peace process’ in the region since at least the mid-1970s. They were raised high with the 1993/1995 Oslo Accords, which set in motion a process of negotiating a “two-state solution.” The WCC sought to encourage those hopes and the vision of two states coexisting side-by-side in peace, security and prosperity, so Israelis and Palestinians alike might enjoy the human dignity and rights to which all are equally entitled.

The WCC supports joint peace projects and dialogue between the peoples of Israel and Palestine and between their governments. We acknowledge with sadness the renewed bouts of conflict and violence in the region. The continuous and reinforced matrix of occupation, the building of the separation wall in many parts of occupied Palestine, the continued establishment of Israeli settlements, and the role of both Israeli and Palestinian extremists have repeatedly thwarted and frustrated hopes for a just and sustainable peace.

The WCC has been deeply involved in efforts for Israeli-Palestinian peace since 1948 when the State of Israel was created and the WCC formally established. Even before 1948, the nascent WCC sought to help European Jews immigrate to safe havens, away from Nazi-occupied territories in Europe and assisted Palestinian refugees forced to leave their ancestral lands.

The WCC has consistently denounced the use of violence and acts of terror, whether by the State of Israel or by Palestinian groups and individuals. A just and sustainable peace cannot be secured by violence, which only begets more violence. In word and action, the WCC has consistently promoted dialogue and negotiation as providing the only viable path for a shared pilgrimage of justice and peace, in Israel-Palestine and throughout the world.

In response to the reality of unimplemented peace plans and UN resolutions, the WCC has produced many statements and suggested several concrete actions. In 2002, the WCC established the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) to provide a concrete manifestation of Christian solidarity through active presence in the occupied Palestinian Territories. In 2007, the 'Amman Call' (issued by an international conference "Churches Together for Peace and Justice in the Middle East" convened by the WCC) launched the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF) as an instrument to "catalyze and coordinate new and existing church advocacy... for peace and justice that serves all people of the region."

Against all the pressures of desperation, provocation and incitement to violence, the WCC has sought to encourage and accompany Palestinian people and communities, and member churches and partners throughout the world, in their efforts to resist occupation, including through economic measures such as divestment from companies profiting from the occupation and boycotting goods produced in illegal settlements on occupied territory. Such actions seek to advance the cause of peace with justice in Israel and Palestine through active non-violent means, using criteria rooted in faith.

With the breakdown of US-led peace efforts in 2014, the peace process established through the 1993/1995 Oslo Accords is widely regarded as having ended in failure. The international community's political will and commitment to efforts to revive the implementation of the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine have waned in the face of facts on the ground that render it unviable. Meanwhile, the political environment in Israel seems less and less conducive to the necessary compromises for a just peace. New initiatives have been proposed to restart the moribund peace process, including an international conference before the end of 2016. But hopes and expectations of such political initiatives are very low.

The WCC itself has encountered aggressive attitudes and actions by the authorities of the State of Israel, with several WCC staff and representatives of member churches and partners seeking to

enter Israel having recently been subjected to exceptionally aggressive, intimidating and abusive interrogation and treatment, including detention for up to three days and deportation.

Hope's end is not a foundation for peace, least of all a just peace. Rather, it is dangerous and fertile terrain for desperate and violent acts, fuelling the extremism now plaguing the entire Middle East. Continued and expanded occupation is corrosive and destructive for the moral and political capacities of both Israelis and Palestinians. If the conflict is not transformed through a just, durable solution, people will continue to die and suffer, their human dignity be diminished, and international law and institutions be further delegitimized.

In this context, and with these concerns, the WCC central committee, meeting in Trondheim, Norway, 22-28 June 2016:

1. ***Calls on*** Israeli and Palestinian leaders to actively and immediately pursue the implementation of a just, viable and sustainable solution to the conflict, by providing a political horizon for an end to occupation and for a just and sustainable peace for both Palestinians and Israelis.
2. ***Urges*** all members of the international community – in particular the Quartet (United Nations, European Union, USA and Russian Federation) – to resume active, determined and consistent efforts to help build such a political horizon for peace with justice between Israelis and Palestinians.
3. ***Calls on*** WCC member churches, specialized ministries and ecumenical partners to be louder voices and more active agents in countering despair and rebuilding hope, in particular through supporting and sustaining the presence and witness of local Christians and member churches in Israel and Palestine, by
 - a) listening to and responding to the voices of Palestinian Christians (including those expressed through the 'Kairos Palestine' document);
 - b) taking active steps to encourage a continued robust indigenous Christian presence in the Holy Land;
 - c) promoting and supporting all non-violent efforts to end the occupation (including considering appropriate economic and other measures); and
 - d) intensifying inter-faith dialogue and cooperation with Jewish and Muslim partners on the pilgrimage of justice and peace.
4. ***Invites*** renewed and redoubled engagement with the vision of a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis where all live with justice, equal rights, dignity and inclusive security, strong church participation in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) – the leading common ecumenical ministry of accompaniment and witness for justice in the region, and through the member churches of the WCC and the Palestine and Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF).

5. ***Calls on*** WCC member churches, specialized ministries and ecumenical partners to recognize the danger of using scripture to in any way justify occupation, and to recognize Christian Zionism as a form of Christian fundamentalism endangering especially indigenous Palestinian Christian communities.

6. ***Expresses*** its concern regarding efforts in legislative bodies throughout the world to silence and penalize calls for non-violent measures to resist illegal occupation, but rather reiterates its support for freedom of expression in all contexts and non-violent means for transforming conflicts.

7. ***Recommends*** that the WCC convene an international ecumenical conference in 2017, marking the 50th anniversary of the occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights, 100 years since the Balfour Declaration, and the 10th anniversary of the 'Amman Call', in order to reaffirm and strengthen ecumenical witness for peace with justice for Israelis and Palestinians.

8. ***Supports*** church leaders in their difficult role to maintain and strengthen the christian presence in the middle east, cradle of christianity.

APPROVED