

## **Israeli/Palestinian Situation: Key Issues for the ELCA (Updated 2/09)**

### **1. Resolution of Conflict: The importance of immediate attention by the U.S. administration**

President Obama indicated during his campaign that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be a priority during his presidency. Indeed, the subsequent appointment of George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace and his early action, including immediate phone calls to regional leaders and announced plans for a trip to the region, are evidence that President Obama is, in fact, making Middle East peace a high priority for his administration.

Yet the situation continues to deteriorate, with the Gaza violence the most recent and salient illustration of the devastating consequences of the failure to resolve this six-decades-old conflict.

The continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, settler attacks on Palestinians, Palestinian political infighting, and rising anger and hostility on all sides make resolution increasingly difficult. The U.S. has a window of opportunity -- which many see as rapidly closing -- that should not be missed to provide strong leadership in helping the parties to achieve a final status agreement resolving all outstanding issues and resulting in a just and lasting peace.

To this end, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) organized an ecumenical letter to then President-elect Obama, and the National Religious Leadership Initiative (NILI) also sent a letter, with the ELCA and Presiding Bishop Hanson as signatories on both. These groups, along with many other individuals and organizations, urged immediate engagement on the Israeli/Palestinian issue by the new administration.

### **2. Jerusalem**

The question of Jerusalem as part of a comprehensive peace agreement has proven to be one of the most contentious issues. Both Israelis and Palestinians expect Jerusalem to be the capital of their states. Numerous proposals to share the city have been put forth, for example the Geneva Accord, a document worked out by Israelis and Palestinians outside the context of official negotiations. The general contours of a shared capital would include Israeli sovereignty over Jewish neighborhoods (essentially West Jerusalem), Palestinian sovereignty over Palestinian neighborhoods (essentially East Jerusalem) and shared responsibility with a possible international presence for holy sites.

The continued expansion of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the route of the barrier which encloses some Israeli settlements and excludes some Palestinian neighborhoods present obstacles to a shared Jerusalem. The recurring issue of whether to

move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem raises concern each time it comes up in Congress, and would be more appropriately left to a time when the parties address the question of Jerusalem in final status negotiations.

### **3. Movement and access in the West Bank**

Within the occupied West Bank, an area slightly smaller than Delaware, there are currently around 600 military checkpoints. These obstacles range from dirt mounds and removable concrete barriers to permanent staffed structures resembling toll booths through which all traffic must pass, or in some cases, through which persons must exit their vehicles and pass on foot. In addition to these obstacles, the West Bank is crisscrossed by roads which connect Israeli settlements to one another and to Israel proper. These roads, reserved for Israeli use, separate Palestinian towns from one another and require Palestinians to travel circuitous routes to their destinations. Furthermore, a swathe of the Jordan Valley along the west bank of the Jordan River has been declared a “closed military zone” by Israel. For Palestinians living in the West Bank, these factors, in addition to a system of restrictive residence permits, mean that travel to relatives, the hospital, or work can be delayed by hours or made impossible.

Our Palestinian Christian partners experience first-hand the struggle of traveling in the region. For example, most recently, doctors and other workers at the Lutheran World Federation’s Augusta Victoria Hospital have been faced with new and cumbersome Israeli restrictions on their ability to travel to and from the hospital.

### **4. Settlements**

Israeli settlements remain a major obstacle to peace. The settlements are illegal under international law, and agreements between the parties, including the Road Map, call for a settlement freeze. Nevertheless, settlements in the West Bank continue to expand. Since the Annapolis conference in November 2007, the Government of Israel has announced its intention to build over 2,000 new homes in the settlements of Har Homa, Betar Illit, and Pisgat Zeev.<sup>1</sup> Overall, the West Bank settler population increased 150% to almost 300,000 between 1989 and 2008, along with a 400% increase in the amount of land under Israel’s direct control.<sup>2</sup> The settler population including East Jerusalem is now close to half a million. The expansion of settlements, along with the attendant infrastructure of roads and services, is making a two-state solution increasingly more unattainable over time.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Restoring the Balance, the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations, 2008, p. 142.

2 “Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories,” Foundation for Middle East Peace, November-December 2008, citing World Bank report, “Macroeconomic and Fiscal Framework for the West Bank and Gaza: Second Review of Progress,” Staff Report for the Meeting of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (Quartet), September 22, 2008.

3 Note: Israel withdrew all its settlers from Gaza in 2005.

## 5. The route of the barrier

Israel is in the process of completing construction on a barrier to separate Israel proper from the West Bank. While recognizing Israel's need to defend itself, the route of the separation barrier is problematic. A July 2008 report by the United Nations (UN) notes, "The majority of the route, approximately 87%, runs inside the West Bank and East Jerusalem, rather than along the 1949 Armistice Line (Green Line)," and goes on to state, "This has a major impact on Palestinian villages, towns and cities, isolating communities and separating tens of thousands of people from services, lands and livelihoods."<sup>4</sup> The barrier will be 449 miles long upon completion, while the "Green Line" is 199 miles. On July 9, 2004 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion stating that the route of the barrier violates international law. While the ICJ's opinion is non-binding, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution on July 20, 2004 calling for Israel to comply with the ICJ opinion.

## 6. Gaza

The Gaza Strip, an area previously under the administration of the Palestinian Authority (PA), faced international isolation following the election of Hamas in January 2006. Ongoing rocket attacks on Israel and the Hamas take-over of Gaza in June 2007 resulted in further restrictions on goods and people moving in and out of Gaza. A March 2008 report by British human rights and aid organizations stated, "The situation for 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip is worse now than it has ever been since the start of the Israeli military occupation in 1967."

In late 2008 hostilities between Hamas and Israel erupted in a dramatic escalation of violence. Rocket attacks from Hamas on southern Israel brought a crushing military response by Israeli forces. At the outset, many called for an immediate cease-fire, including the ELCA through a statement issued by Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson. The violence continued, however, resulting in approximately 1,300 Palestinian deaths, including 700 civilians, and more than 5,450 injured and 13 Israelis deaths, including ten soldiers (UN Security Council report, 26 January 2009). Infrastructure and homes in Gaza were severely damaged. By late January each side had declared a unilateral cease-fire, though the situation remains tense and volatile.

Even before the violence of December 2008/January 2009, 80% of Gazans were reliant on humanitarian aid, and basic services including medical care and education were severely compromised despite an agreement on movement and access brokered by Secretary of State Rice in 2005 to which Israel and the PA agreed. In addition to the moral dimension, this collective punishment of Gaza residents is counterproductive. The interest of security would be better served by urging reconciliation between Palestinian

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4 "The Humanitarian Impact of the Barrier," July 2008.

factions, a sustained cease-fire between Israel and Gaza, and negotiations toward a comprehensive peace.

### **7. Palestinian Christians and the ELCA's partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem and Holy Land (ELCJHL) and The Lutheran World Federation (LWF)**

The ELCA's Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine calls for advocacy to protect and enhance the work of the Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH), Lutheran schools operated by the ELCJHL and the LWF's vocational and other health facilities in the region, in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

The Lutheran World Federation's AVH on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem brings together Israeli and Palestinian doctors for joint training and medical projects in its "Peace through Health" program, thus embodying the peaceful coexistence that is the long-term hope for the city and the region. An ambitious cancer program is underway to provide oncology treatment to the underserved population of the West Bank and Gaza. In spite of obstacles to movement, the hospital manages a transportation system to get patients to and from treatment. The Israeli Civil Administration has been helpful in ensuring access, yet checkpoints and the barrier provide ongoing hardship.

Also important is the Mount of Olives Housing Project, an international partnership effort that will help alleviate the critical shortage of housing and strengthen the dwindling Christian presence in Jerusalem by constructing 84 housing units. Already, \$4.6 million has been pledged by the Church of Sweden towards the estimated project cost of \$8 million. Within the ELCA, we are approaching the mid-point of our \$2 million goal, but there is much work still to be done as we affirm our commitment to our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land.

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