

*ISRAEL-PALESTINE:
FOR HUMAN VALUES IN
THE ABSENCE OF A
JUST PEACE*

STUDY GUIDE

Part 1: Historical Background: A land for two peoples and three faiths

Introduction

Why did the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopt a new policy statement on Israel-Palestine in 2016, and how can that statement help us as Christians, as citizens of the United States, and as neighbors of both Jews and Muslims? This study guide provides summary and questions in four areas: history, economics, theology, and recommendations for action from the Report: *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace*, hereafter “*The Report*” [<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/israel-palestine-human-values-absence-just-peace/>]. The study guide can be read in parallel with the Report or can stand alone. It also builds upon a brief 2014 affirmation of equal rights for all people, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, under the long-term control of Israel—a statement that encouraged conversation with groups from neighboring synagogues, temples, and mosques, based on the prophetic texts of our linked traditions. Section 4 of this guide is also intended to help readers prayerfully consider, as the 2016 Assembly requested, whether the PCUSA should expand its current uses of nonviolent economic witness for peace by joining the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

The Presbyterian Church [PCUSA, or “the Church”] historically has had and still has a deep concern for Israel-Palestine for many reasons, including its place in Christian self-understanding and the prominent role the United States has played there. Since 1949, the Church has frequently taken public positions on the situation, supporting Israel as a safe homeland for Jews but also calling for the just treatment of Palestinians, including refugees. The 2010 PCUSA study, *Breaking Down the Walls*, reaffirmed these positions.¹ The PCUSA has supported the international consensus favoring a two-state solution with a shared Jerusalem. Yet, as situations change, the Church re-evaluates its positions accordingly. As the Report shows, the door to a viable Palestinian state is closing rapidly, if it is still open at all. Many political leaders and policy experts in Israel, Palestine, the US, and the rest of the world share this view.

Many Presbyterians travel to the Holy Land for pilgrimage and study, and observe the facts on the ground in the land where Jesus once walked and proclaimed God’s kingdom. Native peoples suffered then and are still suffering now under the oppression of a military occupation.

The Report examines “the actual situation of Palestinians and Israelis in the land they share...” Although the Report does not elaborate on the competing historical narratives, because *Breaking Down the Walls* covered that in detail, if a church group comes to the Israel-Palestine issues for the first time, they need to know how the conflict over the meaning and history of the land stands at the center of the whole Israel-Palestine conflict. So the first section of this study guide shows that there is more to the history than we usually hear from our pulpits or teach our children in Sunday school. When we begin to tell the story of the land, whose story do we tell? And whose story have we often left out?

Two Stories told by Two Peoples

To understand Israel-Palestine we must acknowledge that there are multiple histories of the land, and that these histories are at times radically at odds with each other. Part of winning the struggle for power in the region has been about whose story gets to be heard. So, with the acknowledgment that no one history can be objective and complete, let us look at summaries of the two most common stories.

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/4-middle-east-study-2010-2012.pdf>

The Israeli Narrative

The Israeli narrative, derived from Hebrew scripture, is a story with which readers may be familiar. For instance, a [recent video](https://www.facebook.com/IsraelMFA/videos/10154038006641317/) by the Israeli Department of Foreign Affairs describes a special connection of Jews to the land, through history. (<https://www.facebook.com/IsraelMFA/videos/10154038006641317/>) This story begins with God's promise to Abraham. It follows Moses and the Hebrew people out of Egypt, through the desert, and across the Jordan. It is a story of conquest, of Joshua and Jericho. It is a story of kings, of Saul and David. It is a story of tragedy and of triumph, of kings and people losing their way, falling into exile, and then returning.²

Hebrew scriptures end with the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return from the Babylonian exile. What followed was a brief period of flourishing for the recreated Jewish state. By the first century of the common era (CE), however, the land had fallen under the domination of the Roman Empire. Jesus and the leaders of the early Christian movement lived in this political milieu.

While Jews remained a significant presence in the areas around Jerusalem, the land itself became the Roman province of Judea. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE is commonly understood as the end of the Biblical entity known as Israel, though certainly not of its people. By this point, Jewish migration to other parts of the Roman Empire had begun in earnest, the beginning of what is termed the *diaspora*. The Jewish community chafed under Roman rule and mounted repeated guerrilla campaigns against Roman occupation. The last large-scale rebellion was the failed Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 CE), which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and scattering of its people.

For centuries after that, a demographically small Jewish presence remained in the land. Then, in late 19th century Europe, a movement began to reestablish a home for the Jewish people on the land we now call Israel-Palestine. A resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe, culminating in the Holocaust or *Shoah*, created incentives to emigrate, and the weakening and eventual demise of Ottoman rule in Palestine and its British replacement in the 20th Century made migration more feasible. The theme of return from exile, which plays an important role in the Old Testament story, is central to the modern Israeli narrative as well; many Jews and Christians see the creation of Israel as a continuation of the Biblical promise, bridging the gap of centuries.

The Palestinian Narrative

The years that are left out of the Israeli narrative, those years between the fall of the Temple and the rise of modern Israel, are central to the other story, the one told by Palestinians.³ This too, includes a story of exile—an exile that is ongoing. The land we now call Israel-Palestine, particularly the fertile Jordan Valley, was never a land without people. People were already there when Abraham got there, when Moses brought his people back, and when Joshua crossed the Jordan. Romans and other non-Jews lived there along with the Jews in Jesus' time. Their descendants include Muslim and Christian Palestinians, who were the vast majority when large numbers of Jews started arriving in the 20th Century.

² A central Biblical theme, which carried over strongly in the teachings of Jesus, was God's commandment to act with justice and mercy toward all persons in the land, whatever their tribal or ethnic affiliation. At several points in the Hebrew Bible God rescinds or puts on hold Israel's claim to the land, because of the nation's failure to fulfill the covenant requirements of faithfulness and justice. See the treatment of the land and covenant in section two of *Breaking Down the Walls* (2010) <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/report-middle-east-study-committee/>

³ The term Palestine derives from its Roman provincial name, and the genetic history of today's Palestinians includes people with many other ethnic labels over the centuries—Sumerian, Canaanite, Hittite, Philistine, Roman, Arab, Turkish, Hebrew, etc.

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After remaining under Roman control throughout the classical period, the territory which we now designate as Israel-Palestine fell under Arab Muslim control with the rise and the spread of Islam in the 600s. During this period notable Christian churches and monasteries were demolished or taken over as Muslims built up Jerusalem, their third holiest city. Although European Christians made repeated attempts to conquer portions of what they called the Holy Land, they had limited success. Several Crusades managed to establish temporary and unstable Christian kingdoms around Jerusalem, but it remained largely under Arab Muslim control until the Ottoman Empire conquered the region in 1516. It remained under Turkish Muslim control until the First World War. In those centuries Arab peoples built communities, raised families, and established traditions. Their history was written on the same territory where the Jewish histories in the Old Testament had been set.

The attempts by European powers to mediate between the historical claims of two peoples on one land can be hard to follow. Viewed from a century's distance, we might wonder why European powers had any say in the matter to begin with. But of course, as practiced imperialists, they did get involved. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 laid out the post-war division of the Middle East. It dealt explicitly with the creation of either an Arab state or a confederation of the lands controlled by France and Great Britain. In this document, the British and French governments said they were "prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab states" in the areas of modern-day Syria and Israel-Palestine.

The more famous Balfour Declaration of 1917 went a different direction. During World War I the British government began to move towards the idea of establishing an independent Jewish homeland in Palestine. Arthur James Lord Balfour's promise is crucial to subsequent history. It states, in part:

*His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.*⁴

Thus, the area which Jews and Christians have known for centuries as The Promised Land was again promised, this time not by any god, but by European colonial powers. And disturbingly, it was promised twice, to two peoples with conflicting historical understandings of their rights to the land and with very different visions of its future.

By the time of the Balfour declaration, Jews accounted for roughly ten percent of the population of Palestine. Under British patronage (Great Britain would dictate policy in Palestine for 30 more years) their numbers grew steadily. Tensions between Jewish immigrants and the Arab population grew correspondingly, often breaking into armed conflict. In 1947 the government of Great Britain handed over what had become known as the "Palestinian problem," ceding responsibility to the United Nations. On November 29, 1947 the UN General Assembly recommended the partition of Palestine into two separate states, a proposal that was supported as "an indispensable minimum" by Jewish leaders and rejected entirely by Arab governments. This gave rise to the armed conflict of 1948, which established the state of Israel, well beyond the borders foreseen in the Partition Plan. [See maps on page 20 of the Report].

⁴ "The Balfour Declaration," Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, eds. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict*, (Facts on File Publications: New York, 1984) 18.

The Next Chapter: Basic Issues Identified by the 2016 Report

And so 1948 was the end of an “exile.” Or was it the beginning of an exile? Was it a glorious moment of national liberation? Or was it a moment of national catastrophe (*nakba*, in Arabic), when the indigenous people of the land were dispossessed and became outsiders? These two stories, so at odds with each other, continue at the center of the conflict today. The Report does not attempt to resolve the competition of these legacies and histories, which the peoples of Israel-Palestine must do for themselves. Rather, it calls US Presbyterians to apply the lens of our values (see part 3 of this guide) to that situation to discern how to modify our involvement so as to reduce suffering, even if a political solution is not imminent.

The Report was commissioned by the 221st General Assembly (2014) to study the viability of a two-state solution and determine whether the church could still credibly advocate that particular outcome. The two-state solution, in general terms, is at face value the simplest and most just answer to the competing claims of two peoples. The land would be divided, in some fashion yet to be determined, between the two claimants. It is, in essence, the future envisioned by the United Nations in 1947. It is the future envisioned by the Oslo Accords, signed in 1993. It is also a future that some on both sides stubbornly resist, and that has become less and less likely.

As the body of the Report describes, the mechanics of enabling two sovereign nations to share the same land are problematic at best. Given repeated failures of peace processes, the Report sees the best contribution of religious bodies to be working with moral parameters rather than geographic perimeters. Major obstacles to a two-state solution were identified in the Oslo Accords and continue to exist, ultimately rooted in the question of the land and of whose version of history and preponderance of power will take precedence:

---**The Right of Return.** The descendants of the 750,000 Palestinians expelled in 1948 number in the millions. International law guarantees an *individual* right of return, repatriation, or compensation to refugees. While steadily preventing their return, Israel has at times offered refugees some compensation, but nowhere near amounts acceptable to the Palestinians (and the neighboring countries “hosting” them).

---**Settlements.** Since the early 1970s much of the West Bank, intended for the future Palestinian state, has been appropriated by the Israeli government for construction of state-subsidized Jewish-only settlements and their infrastructure. Under the Geneva Conventions, permanent settlement of Israel’s citizens in the occupied Palestinian territory is colonization and illegal. With over 650,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank and more coming each year, strategically splitting off East Jerusalem, a contiguous and sustainable state is hard to imagine.

---**Borders.** Borders define a country in important ways, but the Government of Israel has never defined its borders. As the Report notes, “60% of the West Bank, designated in the Oslo accords either to be part of a future Palestinian state or to be territory that the Palestinians could exchange with Israel in a final settlement, is now shown on maps from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism as indistinguishable from the parts of Israel within its internationally recognized borders. The parcels of the West Bank under Palestinian control are fragmented from each other and cut off from Jerusalem, Jordan, and the rest of the world with whom they need to trade and communicate.” (p. 5)

As you begin your study of the Report, we invite you to consider first the land, your understanding of it, and how its history and your history intersect. The following questions may help to guide your reflection: *What does “promised land” mean to you? Is it a relevant concept in today’s conflict?*

- *How important are historical claims of continuity to theological legitimations of the modern state of Israel and its continuing expansion? When we reference “Israel” in our worship, hymns, and confessions, do we mean a people descended from Jacob [renamed Israel]? the Biblical land? the modern state? the spiritual kingdom of God? all or none of these?*

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- *How familiar are you with the history of Arab peoples in the land? How familiar do you think most Americans are with this history?*
- *Are Palestinian refugees entitled to the same rights of return granted to other refugees throughout the world? If not, what are the differences between the Palestinian exile and other refugee situations? Do peoples also have rights of return, and do peoples always need specific “homelands?”*
- *If someone were taking away your family’s ancestral homestead, how much more than the market value would you ask as compensation?*

Part 2: Presbyterian Values, Human Rights, and International Law in Israel-Palestine

Bearing in mind the broad history in Part 1, this second part of the study guide turns our attention to human rights and real people in Israel-Palestine today. The Report makes the case that the unproductive debate over political solutions, for which PCUSA has no special calling, has distracted us from the pervasive abuses of human rights. The Report also starts to address that imbalance and highlight the issues of human rights.

Popular media, such as the movie *Exodus*, put human faces—sometimes sanitized and over dramatized—on the Jewish people in the story. Palestinians were usually underrepresented and often demonized. To redress that balance, this section of the study guide lets us put human faces also on Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel.

Among the Presbyterian values elaborated in the Report and in part III of this study guide, three are particularly relevant to this section: the dignity of all persons, equal protection under the law, and solidarity with those who suffer. These values influenced and are linked with the modern understanding of human rights.

While sharing the values of dignity and equality with countless persons of good will, the prophetic tradition and teachings of Jesus (as in Matthew 5 [Sermon on the Mount] and 25 [solidarity with those suffering]) lead Presbyterians to confront our own enabling of injustice and move onto the side of those who suffer. Thus this section also challenges the posture of neutrality and beckons us to provide balance in a situation of extreme inequality.

Human Rights and International Law

All Israelis and All Palestinians are entitled to full and equal human rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR], adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, affirms that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” The UN General Assembly calls upon “every individual and every organ of society” to promote respect for the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration’s thirty articles.⁵ But we urge the reader to remember that, on the most basic level, Israelis have freedom of movement while most Palestinians do not.

⁵ John S. Nurser reminds us that the roots of United Nations Declaration of Human Rights can be traced back to early 20th Century missionary conferences. See *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

The UDHR makes clear that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms” set forth, “without distinction of any kind,” and expressly states that “no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs.” The Declaration makes no exceptions for reasons of national security, regional stability, or geopolitical advantage.

Israelis and Palestinians alike want and deserve security, and at present neither group has adequate security. Nonetheless, using indicators like deaths and property destruction, the Report shows that insecurity of Palestinians is far greater than that of Israelis, especially Israelis living within the country’s internationally recognized borders. Most activity of the Israeli security forces goes toward protecting the illegal settlements, in the vicinities of which Palestinian rights are often abused. The weapons and money coming from the US to the Israeli military have contributed to an extreme imbalance of power, and hence to an attitude of impunity among many in the Israeli government and military.

International Law Provides for Self-Determination for the Palestinian People

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966, signed by the USA and Israel, and ratified by most member states, transformed many of the human rights protections of the UDHR into binding international law. Both treaties set forth a collective right to self-determination, by virtue of which a people have the right to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” The emphasis on the right to self-determination in 1966 reflected a reaction to the colonial past of newly independent UN member states, recognizing from their experience that human dignity and fundamental freedoms cannot flourish unless people have the right to choose the sovereignty under which they live.

International Law Obliges the Occupier to Protect the Human Rights of those Occupied and to Refrain from Annexation and Establishment of Settlements in the Occupied Territories

Israel is the Occupying Power, maintaining control by martial law over the Palestinian territories of Gaza, West Bank, and East Jerusalem that was occupied after 1967. International law on belligerent occupation comes from the Hague Regulations of 1907, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and other customary international laws. It sets limits on what a military occupying force may legally do, and gives certain rights to the occupied people. The text and Annex A of the Report give details. UN Security Council Resolution 1322 (2000) “Calls upon Israel, the occupying Power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations and its responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in a Time of War of 12 August 1949...” The Security Council vote was 14 to 0, making it obligatory international law.

The Fourth Geneva Convention makes “protected persons” of the Palestinians living in the Palestinian territory after 1967 and those exiled from Palestinian territories seized by Israel in 1947–1949. It protects all their human rights under international law. Thus the Israeli government violates international law and commits war crimes under the Geneva Convention when it denies human rights to Palestinians, uses collective punishment, closes areas and annexes land beyond Israel’s internationally recognized borders or establishes settlements there, or takes other actions to change the legal status, geographical nature, and demographic composition of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (including East Jerusalem). The International Court of Justice declared in 2004 that Israel’s construction and fortification of the separation wall running through East is illegal. The UN Security Council Resolution of January 2017 reiterates the condemnation of the illegal settlements. Israel, as Occupying Power, is obliged under international law to preserve the territorial integrity of all the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and to guarantee the freedom of movement for persons and goods within the Palestinian territory, including movement into and from East Jerusalem and the outside world.

The Tragic Situation of Palestinian Children and Families under Martial Law

When the Israeli military arrests persons under its occupation, especially minors, human rights are an urgent consideration. Often Palestinian youth respond to road closures or house demolitions by throwing stones during daylight, when identifications can be made or alleged. But the Israeli military often arrests adolescent Palestinians at night in hi-tech home invasions (as the US army has used in Iraq and Afghanistan); coerces confessions by threats of indefinite imprisonment; and holds them without trial or access to a lawyer, translator, or even a parent. Palestinians from the West Bank are often imprisoned in Israel (where families cannot visit), which violates international law. Palestinians do not have full citizenship rights or legal standing to address the government that controls their lives, and those in the West Bank are subject to military courts. To shield children from abuses, Military Court Watch, a non-sectarian organization in Israel-Palestine, recommends the following reforms to Israeli military police treatment of Palestinian minors:

- no night raids to arrest minors;
- every child to be told their legal rights in a language he/she understands;
- every child granted access to an attorney before interrogation;
- every child's parents present during interrogation; and,
- every interrogation is A/V recorded.

*Do you agree with these recommendations, which GA 2016 has endorsed? (The Report, p. 38)
What are the consequences of these practices on children, families, and communities?*

Where is the Opportunity for the Palestinians?

Infrastructure and Mineral Resources

The human right to self-determination of peoples applies not only to politics, but also to economic development and access to resources.

In contradiction of international law, the Israeli occupation in the West Bank has claimed and now exploits almost all of the mineral resources in the West Bank—territory that the Oslo Accords foresaw as the future Palestinian State—and has built roads, settlements, parks, sports facilities, etc. for the exclusive use of the Jewish settlers. The settlers and the Israeli government routinely destroy Palestinian homes, wells, businesses, and orchards. In the shrinking and increasingly fragmented territories left to them, Palestinians are harassed at numerous checkpoints and closely restricted in what they can build; permits to build anything are often denied. They are allowed only minimal internet (usually 2G) access, while the Israeli settlers can access 4G. This systematic inequality destroys opportunities for employment and economic self-sufficiency for Palestinians. Many wait hours each day for an uncertain chance to come into Israel and Jerusalem to work for Israelis. A very few vent their frustration through violence.

How would you react to such blatant economic discrimination? Do you think that improving the economic opportunities for Palestinians would improve the prospects for peaceful coexistence?

Water is Life

In a land as parched as Palestine, water is a critical and scarce resource—both for economic development and for life itself. Unfortunately for Palestinians, the Israelis in the settlements and near the borders have seized the lion's share of the water. Their per capita water consumption is over twice the consumption of Palestinians in the West Bank and especially in Gaza. The extensive water infrastructure built for

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settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory violates the Geneva Convention, as do the tight restrictions on Palestinian efforts to develop wells, etc. The separation wall extends into Palestinian land in ways that seize valuable aquifers, and Israel has dug a dense network of wells along the Gaza border, capturing water before it flows into Gaza. People in Gaza therefore get very little water, of very poor quality.

Were you aware that the route of the separation wall annexes water resources? What effects do you expect the overall water picture has on Palestinian agriculture?

A People Imprisoned: Palestinian Life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in Israel

East Jerusalem, which the Oslo Accords identified as the future capital of the Palestinian state, has been cut off from the rest of the West Bank by Israel's and by security checkpoints, keeping out most Palestinians. In violation of international law, the Israeli government annexed East Jerusalem and expanded the city's boundaries further into the West Bank, thus depriving Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem of any national citizenship. Permission to continue living in their homes is frequently cancelled. Systematic land reconfiguration, demolition of Palestinian homes, and large settlements, aimed to create an exclusively Jewish Jerusalem, have marginalized the other national and religious groups in the city, contributing to a loss of Christian presence and increasing tension with Muslims.

*16-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir lived in the **Shu'fat** neighborhood of East Jerusalem. The neighborhood is relatively well-off and calmer than some other areas, and its residents rarely get into confrontations with the Israeli police.¹ Muhammad's father owned and ran an electric appliances store, and the youth was studying to become an electrician at the Amal vocational high school. The family is part of a large clan that is well known in Shu'afat. In July 2014, he helped decorate the main street in Shu'fat with lamps for the occasion of **Ramadan**.*

On July 2, 2014 two Israeli (Jewish) minors and their uncle, angry and fired up by incendiary rhetoric from Israeli leaders in the wake of the kidnapping and death of 3 Israelis, abducted Mohammad from an East Jerusalem sidewalk. Although Mohammad had no connection to the death of the kidnapped Israelis, the uncle and nephews strangled and beat him with a wrench in the back of a car and drove him to a forest near Jerusalem where they burned him alive. Eventually an Israeli court found the two Jewish teenagers guilty of murder.⁶

West Bank – The Oslo Agreements foresaw the entire West Bank as the future Palestinian State, with minor mutually agreed-upon territorial adjustments in the land-for-peace model. The Oslo Accords made a temporary division of the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C for interim administrative purposes. The majority of Palestinians in the West Bank live in the scattered, mostly urban areas that comprise Area A. The economic viability of Area A would depend on developing transport infrastructure, mining, agriculture, and herding in Areas B and C. The Israeli government has never allowed this development. Rather, it has seized Area C (60% of West Bank) and parts of B to develop illegal settlements and support their economic activity, leaving most West-Bank Palestinians in the isolated and besieged scraps of Area A which remain. Two books describe the human impact of the occupation:

*The first, **The Boy and The Wall**, by Amahl Bishara, describes life in the Aida Refugee Camp. About 4,500 Palestinian refugees live in the camp, near Bethlehem; more than half of them are children. The refugees, or their parents and grandparents, were pushed out of their villages when the state of Israel was created in 1948, and they have lived in a refugee camp since then. They have not been allowed to return to their homes and farmland, and they have not been compensated—despite the yearly resolutions of the United Nations since 1949*

⁶ Isabel Kershner. Two Jewish Teenagers Found Guilty of Murdering Palestinian 16. *New York Times*, 11/30, 2015.

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affirming the right of return for repatriation or compensation (UN Gen. Assembly, Resolution 194). Israel's three-story concrete wall was built just a few meters from the houses in the overcrowded camp. The camp is regularly subject to military invasion, and the water towers and school building are marked with bullet holes. The children of the camp long for freedom of movement, for a chance to worship in Jerusalem, and to see the sea. They long for an opportunity to lead a life of dignity, to work, to farm, to travel. As Bishara writes, the children long to "become a kite and fly over the wall" that contains them and their families in prison-like conditions. Such collective punishment is illegal under the Geneva Convention.

The second book, Our Harsh Logic, comprises accounts by Israeli soldiers who participated in and later recognized the moral degradation of the military occupation's denial of human rights and terrorization of Palestinian children and parents. They have become ashamed of their actions. For example:

"Working with the population—that was our entertainment. ... 'Working with the people' ... Pouring out the kids' bags and playing with their toys. You know, you'd grab a toy and play 'monkey in the middle', with it. Did the kids cry? All the time. They cried and were scared. Meaning, you couldn't miss it.

The adults cried, too? Of course they did, they were humiliated. The goal was always, 'I got him to cry in front of his kids, I got him to crap in his pants.'

Why? From being beaten, for the most part. Being beaten and threatened and screamed at. Especially if it's in front of your kids. ... There's lots of stories about [soldiers'] pride, like 'Check me out ... I got him to do whatever.' They talked about it all the time. ...I think that an officer who says that he doesn't know about it, he's totally lying."⁷

Thus, the fifty-year military occupation has created trauma—spiritual and emotional scars—for the occupier as well as the occupied.

Gaza: Israel since 1967 has occupied the Gaza Strip, on the Mediterranean coast just north of Egypt. In 2005 the Israeli government closed its few illegal settlements there, but it exerts total control of Gaza's borders by land, air, and sea. Israel put the border fence and no-man zone on Gaza land. Since 2007 Israel has enforced a siege against Gaza, causing debilitating widespread food insecurity, high unemployment, and severely damaged agriculture, fishing, and industry—harm to the entire fabric of life. Thus, according to international law, Gaza continues to be occupied by Israel, and the population of Gaza, 45% under 15 years of age, is being punished collectively. David Cameron, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, described Gaza as "an open-air prison or even concentration camp."

Hamas' anti-Israeli rhetoric and missiles, as well as some Israeli provocation, have led to Israel's frequent military incursions into Gaza, including three major ones since 2008. These killed over 3800 Palestinians, including 900 children; the 2014 attack left over half a million homeless. In contrast, from June 2004 to July 2014, Palestinian military actions killed 26 Israeli civilians (4 minors), 5 soldiers, and 2 foreign nationals.⁸

Zaina Attia Al-Amour, known as Um Hani, a 55-year-old grandmother, lived in al-Foukhari in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, one of the areas most hurt by Israel's 2014 attack... Um Hani lived and worked a small farm, left to her after her husband died in early 2000s. When not working, she often watched news ...in her bedroom, with a mattress and a few cushions. She liked to be informed about current affairs. On the morning of May 5, 2016, Um Hani spent time playing with her grandson, Ghazi, joking about who exactly owned a new animal on the

⁷ Breaking the Silence. *Our Harsh Logic: Israeli Soldiers' Testimonies from the Occupied Territories, 2000-2010*. Pp. 236-37.

⁸ Source: Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem.

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*farm. That afternoon, while she was harvesting wheat in her field, she was killed by Israeli airstrikes, which also killed three children. Official Israeli sources claimed that the attack was necessary to detect tunnels. The Israeli military did not explain why, with all their advanced surveillance capacity, they decided to bomb a field where a grandmother was harvesting wheat.*⁹

Palestinian Israelis. About 1.4 million Palestinians—mostly Muslim, but also some Christian and Maronite—live as citizens in the internationally recognized borders of Israel, including West Jerusalem. They are mostly Palestinians whose families have lived there for generations; some were displaced from their original villages in the Israeli attacks in the 1940s. The Israeli Declaration of Independence of 1948 says that the country “...will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture, it will safeguard the Holy places of all religion, and it will be faithful to the principles of the charter of the United Nations.” But non-Jewish citizens of Israel are second-class citizens, without the subsidies and privileged access to housing and education given only to Jewish citizens.

Aseel Asleh (May 6, 1983 – October 2, 2000) was from the village of Arraba in the Lower Galilee. He described himself as "a Palestinian-Israeli", had many Jewish friends, and in 1997 joined the international conflict-resolution organization, Seeds of Peace, which became a big part of his life. He started the tradition of mass emails between Seeds, a tradition that later gave birth to the SeedsNet listserv. He took part in the first bi-national school presentations, the first organized trip to Jordan, the first regional Purim party, a Seeds of Peace Summit in Villars, Switzerland, and the Declaration of Principles Committee. He was taking computer courses at the Ort Braude College in Carmiel and also studied at Prophet Elias High School in Ibilin, a Christian school.

Asleh attended a protest in his village on 2 October in response to Israel's military violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, particularly the killing of twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Dura in Gaza a few days earlier. Asleh was among the thirteen Palestinian citizens of Israel killed during demonstrations throughout Israel that October 2000. Trying to disperse the protest in Arraba, Israeli Security Forces unit shot tear-gas and live ammunition at the protesters. Although police officers stated that they did not know how he was killed, a physician who treated Asleh commented that the youth was shot in the neck at point-blank range, and that crucial time had been lost when the police delayed the arrival of an ambulance. The Israeli government-appointed Or Commission strongly condemned Israeli police for being unprepared for the protests and possibly using excessive force to disperse the protesters. Asleh was wearing his Seeds of Peace T-shirt that day.

Reflection Questions:

- *Is the State of Israel living up to its claimed original purposes, as proclaimed in its Declaration of Independence? If changes are needed, what are they—and why might they be resisted?*
- *Collective punishment is punishing many for the acts of a few, and it is prohibited under the Geneva Conventions. Do you think the conditions described in several of the examples constitute collective punishment? Do you think they can be justified on the grounds of security, which is what Israeli authorities generally claim?*
- *Should national security or other rationales grant Israel an exemption from international law, as its influential allies contend? Or should Israel be held to the same rule of law as other nations?*

⁹ *The Electronic Intifada*, 3 June 2016 and *Ma'an News Agency*, May 5, 2016.

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- Under international law, national security does not justify the denial of human rights. *Is the use of a separate military justice system for Palestinians (not settlers) in the occupied territories inherently prone to abuses? Are there ways to ensure human rights without anchoring them in citizenship?*
- In December of 2016, in the United Nations Security Council, the U.S. departed from its typical pattern of using its veto to shield Israel from the rebukes issued by a vast majority of nation states. This underlined Secretary of State Kerry's repeated warnings that the Israeli settlement project is a barrier to peace. *Do you think that the settlement project undermines the viability of a two-state solution? How important are other obstacles? Can you name any recent developments that advance the possibility of a two-state solution?*
- Criticism of the Israeli government is sometimes seen as anti-Semitic, and Jews themselves are discouraged from public criticism of the "Jewish State." *Should concern over accusations of anti-Semitism foreclose moral conversation about the realities of human rights abuses by the state of Israel? What is God calling Presbyterians to do when our eyes are opened to the suffering of Palestinians and their children? How does this awareness impact our commitments to fairness if they conflict with a position of neutrality? This is addressed in the next section.*

Part 3: Our Theological Foundation to Speak about Israel-Palestine & Human Rights

In Part 2 of this study guide, we examined the stories of Palestinians and looked at the situation on the ground through the lens of human rights. In this section, we turn to theology as a way of looking at the conflict. Theology is a language especially appropriate to the church. As the Report notes, "Values form the theological heart of our report. The church advocates for upholding the downtrodden and oppressed, while working to enhance the dignity and wellbeing of all people. These values form a universal message based in the belief that a sovereign God, made perfectly manifest in Jesus Christ as he is witnessed in Scriptures, cares for all people at all times." (p. 13) Human rights are thus based both in creation and incarnation.

As Christians, our actions should follow our principles, grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ. The Report declines to advocate for any particular political solution to the conflict in Israel-Palestine, whether two-state or otherwise, for two reasons: first, humility about our role as Christians in the United States, and second, is recognition of the particular strengths of the PCUSA as a community of faith.

Our Rationale for Mission

To understand the first point, we recognize that our denomination's approach to all of world mission has changed significantly in recent decades. In the old model of mission, dating from Christian encounters with the non-Christian world in the 19th century and before, we as Christians bring the truth to people who have yet to encounter it. According to that model, we were the bearers of knowledge and of answers, and we viewed the people to whom we were missionaries as primarily the recipients of that knowledge.

This approach, however, is patronizing to someone on the receiving end of our "benevolence." It assumes that as Christians from the United States, we have more knowledge of a culture than those actually in that culture. It assumes the superiority of our interpretations and of our interests. It is doing mission **to** a people, rather than **with** them.

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In recent years, PCUSA has acknowledged the error inherent in this approach to mission. As an alternative, we recognize the necessity of listening to those with whom we are in mission. We have changed our language as well as our thinking, describing those called to world mission as mission co-workers rather than as missionaries. This “mission with” approach emphasizes that we are partners—and we are often the junior partner. We cannot abdicate our own moral judgment, though, nor abandon sisters and brothers.

When we apply this mission philosophy – or missiology – to the situation in Israel-Palestine, the wisdom of refraining from endorsing a particular political solution becomes apparent. Any solution to the conflict, if it is to be a true and lasting solution, cannot be imported and imposed from outside. We have mission partners throughout the region, and we must listen to their voices and support their efforts, rather than enforcing our own interests. One way for congregations to begin this process of listening would be to examine the [Kairos Palestine](#) document, an assessment of the situation in Israel-Palestine that Palestinian people of faith have themselves produced. (See Annex 1).

The Church’s Particular Calling

The second point, regarding the particular calling of the church, becomes clear with a reading of the *Kairos Palestine*. As in the report *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace*, the heart of the Kairos document is theology. Although some experts in statecraft are members of the church, statecraft is not the church’s calling. Rather, as a community of faith, we have a particular competence in theology and in the language of values, of morality. Our Reformed tradition has been instrumental in crafting the concept of human rights. Hebrew and Christian scriptures stand behind our insistence on the centrality of human rights. As William Sloan Coffin put it, we in the church are to preach and witness for justice to roll down like waters. Diplomats, jurists, and politicians are to build the aqueducts.

Whenever we claim that a particular political arrangement comes closer to the will of God, we must qualify our judgments. We may be tempted again to impose our own interests and values on someone else’s situation. Reinhold Niebuhr warned Christians against the conviction “that our own ideals are perfect”¹⁰ and argued vehemently that no human political solution is synonymous with the Kingdom of God. We should therefore tread lightly, aware that our Christian faith must insist on certain values and yet also aware that our cherished solutions might be flawed. Not only are the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (hardly a government, as the Report documents) deeply flawed, so is our own government.

Central Theological Commitments

The Report therefore maintains that a theological center is appropriate. It highlights six Biblically grounded values that are necessary in our work as a church on Israel-Palestine.

The Dignity of All Persons

Then God Said, “Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness... (Gen 1:26)

¹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (1944; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 152.

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As Christians we affirm unconditionally that every human being has worth because God created *all* human beings. Any political system that degrades some human beings and treats them as less worthy than those of another group is, therefore, unacceptable on theological grounds.

The Self-Determination of Peoples

You have made them [human beings] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands. (Psalm 8:5)

Affirming the dignity of human beings promotes their right to shape their own lives. Consistent with our missiology, we reject the idea that any people (including ourselves) has the right to impose its will upon any other people. In situations of occupation, the possibility of determining the course of your own life is remote. In situations of *perpetual* occupation, the possibility vanishes entirely.

Building Community and Pursuing Reconciliation

...in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us . . . we are ambassadors for Christ. (2 Cor 5:19-20)

As Christians we affirm that human beings are meant to live in community. Erecting barriers, physical and otherwise, between people hinders community. Barriers both physical and sociological are dividing people within the Jewish and Palestine communities, as well as keeping the larger communities apart. Ideologies built on exclusion and division work against community. In situations where the possibility of genuine community has been broken for an extended period of time, the church bears responsibility for supporting reconciliation. We are called to tear down walls, not to build them.

The Rule of Law and the Recognition of Equality Before the Law

Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble. (Ps 119:165)

Christians, Jews, and Muslims all belong to traditions that—each in its own way—acknowledge the importance and the binding nature of law. In our own tradition, John Calvin taught that laws restrain us from behavior that violates our professed values. Calvin also saw the law as instructive, giving us a resource in which to grow and through which to live out our faith more fully. But for law to have meaning, it must apply impartially. As David was called out by Nathan, so we must always realize as Christians that we are each subject to the restrictions and recipients of the rights set out by our laws. We must reject any legal system that treats groups of people differently based on religion or ethnicity, and reject any system of rule that ignores its own laws.

The Recognition of Complicity and the Need for Confession

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23)

We recognize as Christians that we are sinful people. We have built exclusionary communities in our own lives, and often in our churches. We support systems that protect our own interests at the expense of others. When we are asked why we, as Christians living in the United States, have anything to say on Israel-Palestine, part of our response must include the recognition that we have contributed to the pain on both sides of the conflict. Our anti-Semitism and our historic indifference to the Holocaust and its victims contributed to the pain of Jewish people. Our tax dollars have helped to fund the occupation of Palestine, and our policies have helped it to continue and expand. Our weapons defend the occupation and attack those who oppose it.

Solidarity with Those Who Suffer

I have observed the misery of my people . . . Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them (Exodus 3:7- 8).

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In the example of Jesus, we find him standing beside those who have been marginalized. Jesus calls us to pay particular attention to where power lies in any given situation, knowing that justice will be needed for those without power—as the prophets have always taught. PCUSA recently adopted [the Belhar Confession](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologicalworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf) of faith, from South Africa, as part of our own Book of Confessions (https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologicalworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf). It proclaims “that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged... [and that] the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Reformed Faith and Politics

Whenever the church engages in discussions about political situations, even when such discussions are grounded in theological convictions, someone usually raises the objection that the church has no business being “political.” Politics are how communities make decisions, however, and all political decisions have moral dimensions.

Our Reformed tradition has long championed a free and independent government alongside a free and independent church. We see both institutions as ordained by God and crucial to the maintenance of God’s order. Each has distinct functions, but faith is to inspire action in both areas, including political leadership. Although some Christian traditions call their adherents to separate entirely from the political life, the Reformed tradition does not. From its inception, our tradition has maintained that God is sovereign over all aspects of our life, and hence that we should express our Christian faith in all of our activities—not merely within the walls of our sanctuaries. John Calvin concludes his monumental [Institutes of the Christian Religion](https://www.ntslibrary.com/PDFBooks/Calvin_Institutes_of_Christian_Religion.pdf) (https://www.ntslibrary.com/PDFBooks/Calvin_Institutes_of_Christian_Religion.pdf) with an extended theological reflection on government and its role in God’s creation.

We today have a political vocation to be stewards of God’s creation and for all who dwell in it. The same 2014 General Assembly that called for the study of the Israel-Palestine also affirmed its support for equal human rights for all persons under effectively indefinite Israeli government control. That resolution (Study Guide Annex 3) recommended interfaith discussion of this matter with neighboring congregations. Our religion is not a device for our individual salvation alone. It is a call to witness and act in the world. It is in such a spirit and in service of such a call that this Report is offered.

As you continue your study of *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace*, we invite you to reflect on your own theology. The following questions may help guide your reflection:

- *What are your own core theological values? How do they compare to the values expressed in the 2016 Report?*
- *What theological values would you add to or subtract from the list (pp. 13-15)? How would your values help us understand the conflict in Israel/Palestine? Note the Report’s discussion of the land and the place of historic religious and ethnically significant sites (pp 4-5, note 12 especially).*
- *How could your congregation have a discussion of peace in the Middle East with Jewish or Muslim congregations, using either the human rights lens or the 2016 Report’s critical analysis of any two-state solution? Is a shared study of the facts on the ground essential for an honest interfaith conversation?*
- *Do you think the church should have a voice in the political sphere? If your answer is “Yes,” then what are the appropriate roles for a church to play in the political process? If your answer is*

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“No,” then why do you think it is inappropriate for the church to speak? On the issues of Israel-Palestine, are the voices of religious groups particularly important?

Part 4: What Can and Should We Do? Recommendations for Action

This section examines: public policy advocacy, domestic and international; economic witness by groups as well as individuals; and dialogue both within our congregations and with neighboring faith groups, particularly on human rights. These methods are endorsed in the bold-type initial section of the 2016 Report. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recommendations endorsed by the General Assembly guide the work of national agencies but are advisory (rather than required) of individual members and of local bodies, as “God alone is Lord of the conscience...” We cherish the right of personal judgment, even as we raise the church’s collective voice to witness against injustice.

As a denomination with partners in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, PCUSA has taken actions and positions in line with our values of human dignity, self-determination, reconciliation across borders, equality before the law, and solidarity with those who suffer. Because religious voices affect the moral climate, their symbolism has power. For instance, the Prime Minister of Israel reacted strongly to the divestment actions of the 2014 General Assembly, even though the church’s divestment was only from three U.S. companies supporting the occupation (Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, Motorola Solutions), and was not general divestment from Israel. In acting on our values, many supporters of Palestinian rights believe we have not gone far enough, while some in the US and Israel believe we have weakened our witness by antagonizing parts of the Jewish community. This section presents several non-violent strategies for readers to discuss.

Over a half-century of history in Israel-Palestine shows that violence has too often been the response to the contested claims and broken dreams in the region. From afar we have seen the footage of suicide bombing, military occupation, bombardment, and terrorism. Both sides of the conflict have participated in the pervasive violence. But this has not been a contest of equals. The impact of violence in the region has at least for the last 70 years rested more heavily on Palestinians. The massive superiority of Israeli military equipment—some of it financed and supplied by the US—has allowed them to act and overreact with impunity.

So the Christian, moral bottom-line is two-fold. One moral necessity is to end or reduce the violence, so much of which seems predictable given the on-going structural coercion and deprivation. Our theological commitments demand that we seek solutions other than the domination of one people by another, and we reject the idea that the only solution to the conflict is the escalating use of violence by either side against the other. The second moral baseline is our recognition that impunity erodes moral character and democracy, both among those who enforce the domination and among those who enable it. In the words of the 2016 Report, invoking the 2010 study *Breaking Down the Walls*,

“we do affirm the legitimacy of Israel as a state, but consider the continuing occupation of Palestine ... to be illegitimate, illegal under international law, and an enduring threat to peace in the region. Furthermore, we recognize that any support for that occupation weakens the moral standing of our nation internationally and our security.”

Public Policy and Economic Actions

The 2016 Report recommends witness and advocacy to influence four key actors: the US Government, the United Nations (and international community), Palestinian authorities, and the Government (and people)

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of Israel. The Report also strongly supports interfaith dialogue with Jewish and Muslim friends, neighbors, and relatives in the USA.

Advocacy for US Government actions

Recognizing that the United States remains Israel's staunchest ally, despite the continuing occupation and annexation of Palestine and the failures of peace processes, the Report reiterates the calls of prior General Assemblies to make the billions of dollars in U.S. military aid to Israel conditional on its recognizing basic human and citizenship rights for the Palestinian Christians and Muslims who are its citizens or under its occupation.

The GA 2016 urged our Congress to hold hearings into the use of US-made and subsidized military and police equipment by the Government of Israel as it carries out policies that abuse human rights, violate Geneva Accords, or oppose American principles of religious liberty and non-discrimination. This will help fulfill obligations in existing US law—including the Leahy Amendment to the US foreign aid law, which prohibits the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense from providing military assistance to foreign military units that violate human rights. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leahy_Law)

The GA 2016 also supported enforcement of US laws that sustain the prohibition on Israeli participation in the US Visa Waiver Program until Israeli ceases to discriminate against US Passport holders of Palestinian origin. It recommended that members, councils, and appropriate agencies of PC(USA) urge the US Administration and Congress:

- to support greater involvement and possible mediation by the United Nations agencies and Security Council;
- not to exercise our government's Security Council veto against Palestinian efforts for full membership in the United Nations and for standing in international courts and treaties; and
- not to oppose investigations and possible censure, or penalties for human rights violations or war-crimes committed by either Palestinian or Israeli entities.

Advocacy with UN and other international bodies

The GA 2016 recommended that the UN Security Council establish a peacekeeping mission for Israel-Palestine, with a mandate to protect civilians and their human rights; and that UN human-rights monitors be allowed entry, to reduce violations of human rights by Israel or Palestinian authorities.

It recommended that Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas permit the Red Cross and Red Crescent to visit prisons throughout Israel-Palestine and, in case of violations, to be permitted to bring documented complaints to appropriate international judicial or UN bodies.

In witness for solidarity with any group suffering from injustice in Israel-Palestine, the General Assembly also recommended that Presbyterian agencies work with international ecumenical and interfaith bodies whenever possible, to strengthen this witness and ensure that the voices of diverse Israeli and Palestinian groups are heard. It encouraged Presbyterians to read and reflect on documents like *Kairos-Palestine* that come from our Palestinian brothers and sisters, and to support programs like *Christ at the Checkpoint*. [See Annex 1 of this Study Guide for background on *Kairos Palestine*.]

Advocacy with Palestinian leaders

Our Office of Public Witness (OPW) in Washington, DC and the Presbyterian Ministry to the UN (PMUN) in New York have urged Palestinian leaders to increase their coordination and cooperation, to encourage creative and nonviolent initiatives to end human rights violations against Palestinian opponents, and to find ways to maintain dignity and resist the violence of knives, guns, and rockets. The Report is critical of the Palestinian Authority at various points, implicitly more than explicitly (pp. 7, 17, 32), calling for more democratic accountability, resistance to settler and other infringements, and effective connection to the international community. Clearly the de facto support of the United States for Israel's boycott and sanctions on Gaza has heightened the isolation of Hamas, even apart from the periodic wars with its densely packed territory. International law in fact gives an occupied people the right to resist, including violence against military forces, but for the most part neither main Palestinian party seeks to exercise violence, except on defensive terms. [Annex A of the 2016 Report summarizes the law.] The Carter Center is one of the few groups with credibility on both sides of the Palestinian divide.

Advocacy with Israeli government

For building community through social, economic and political enterprises that increase capacity and support for reconciliation, the PCUSA GA 2016 recommended that the Government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and other bodies publicize Israeli and Palestinian actions that contribute to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. It recommended opening opportunities for equal education with unbiased curricula, sports participation, permits to travel, participate in shared work trips, etc.

The PCUSA GA 2016 recommended that all Presbyterians and appropriate agencies of the General Assembly urge the Israeli government to stop its policy and practice of collective punishment and isolation of broad sections of the Palestinian population through measures such as the blockade of Gaza; the demolition of Palestinian homes; and the administrative detention, torture, and forced feeding of Palestinian detainees. It called on Israel to restore the ID documents and citizenship status that have been stripped from Palestinians in East Jerusalem and elsewhere.

PCUSA GA 2016 endorsed the recommendations of the Military Court Watch organization. Even if Israel does not fulfill its obligation to end the practice of child detention (which goes against the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Israel) the military occupation in the West Bank must at least halt its human rights abuses of children. As noted in Part 2, specific reforms would include: that no more night raids to arrest minors be conducted; that every child be told his or her legal rights in a language each understands; that every child be granted access to an attorney before interrogation; that every child's parents be present during interrogations; and that every interrogation be A/V recorded and made publicly available.

With *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace*, GA 2016 emphasized the importance of having vital communities of all three faiths present in Israel-Palestine. In practice, this means calling on the Israeli government to be transparent and accountable in dealing with Muslim and Christian sacred sites. This means affording them the same protections as Jewish sites, allowing freedom of worship and all necessary permits for properly designated religious personnel, and allowing internationally authorized archaeologists to review claims that affect traditional Muslim and Christian areas of living and worship (in the same way that World Heritage sites are reviewed). This follows the United Nations' intention that Jerusalem be an international city to honor and provide access to the holy places of three faiths. The PCUSA GA recommended inviting Christian, Jewish, and Muslim dialogue groups, congregations and communities, here and in Israel-Palestine, to discuss questions of religious liberty vis-a-vis those current practices that highlight certain Jewish objects and customs to the actual and potential detriment of other religious communities.

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Why does the Report ask more from the Israeli state than from the Palestinian Authority or Hamas?

Economic pressure:

In light of the limited success and frequent reversals of “words-only” efforts, the church has moved toward nonviolent economic pressure against the settlement enterprise. PCUSA, with its own funds and member purchasing, has tried to curtail its support for the occupation and settlements while making it clear that it is not divesting from or boycotting the State of Israel within the internationally recognized borders. This accords with our economic support for nonviolent social change in other cases where politics met an impasse. Maintaining the distinction in these actions between Israel within internationally recognized borders and the occupation and illegal settlements in the West Bank, as *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace* does, aims to help keep open the option of a two-state solution. This is one reason why the General Assembly has not endorsed efforts of boycott, divestment, or sanctions that do not distinguish between settlements and Israel, although the Report does reveal how integrated these settlements have become with Israel proper.

Nonetheless, the 2016 Presbyterian General Assembly called for a prayerful study of whether the church should move from its current affirmation of certain boycott, divestment, and sanction actions only against the occupation to a broader endorsement of the Palestinian campaign for BDS against all the Israeli economy (for which we use capital letters). The Israeli government and its supporters in the US have made extraordinary efforts to oppose BDS. Some Jewish groups react to boycott movements of the Israeli state today in light of the earlier history of anti-Semitic boycotts. The government of Israel fears such economic pressure sufficiently to restrict public debate of boycott, divestment, and sanctions, and to restrict travel into and out of Israel-Palestine by those who advocate it. Both of these strategies are undemocratic and restrict freedom of speech not only for Palestinians, but also for Israelis, Americans, and other visitors. Pro-Israel organizations in the US also lobby Congress and state governments to penalize US companies and organizations that publicly choose not to provide economic support to the government of Israel or its settlements. If these laws apply to US religious bodies, those efforts to block our witness would also violate the separation of church and state and the free exercise of public speech and religious liberty.

The PCUSA has repeatedly endorsed a democratic Israel with secure and internationally agreed-upon boundaries, living at peace with its neighbors and providing equal rights to all its citizens under one system of justice. Palestinians under occupation or exiled from their homes do not enjoy such rights, however, and therefore PCUSA has taken several actions regarding corporate engagement in Israel-Palestine. The Presbyterian Foundation and Board of Pensions refrain from investments that support violence against Israelis or Palestinians, including finance and support for the economic activity and expansion of settlements outside of Israel’s recognized borders, in accord with previous PCUSA GA actions. ^[1]_[SEP]

The recommendations in the Report direct PCUSA’s Office of Public Witness and Presbyterian Mission to the UN to advocate with the US government for Israel to reduce trade barriers for US imports into Palestine and exports from Palestinian firms in the West Bank and Gaza. Agricultural and manufactured goods made in Palestine by Palestinians should be able to reach American markets with the same ease as goods made in Israel. The Report supports US Government enforcement of laws requiring correct labeling of the place of production for imports to the US of goods from Israeli settlements.

With regard to donations, the Report recommends that the PCUSA GA support measures by the Internal Revenue Service (and related units of the US government) to investigate and possibly revoke the 501(c)(3) status of organizations, and corresponding tax deductions for individuals, that promote and finance the development or operation of Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law and obstacles to peace. These special tax privileges reduce the funds available for legitimate domestic and international programs and increase the tax burden on those of us who do not take such tax deductions.

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- Do you consider all of the economic witness methods endorsed by the General Assembly to be parts of nonviolent peacemaking strategies? Are they productive or counter-productive in your context and estimation?
- If the distinction between Israel proper and the West Bank settlements ceases to make sense, given *de facto* annexation and the path of the separation wall, will the church's principles require it to participate in broader boycott, divestment, and sanctions directed at Israel proper?

Annex 1: KAIROS PALESTINE

Kairos Palestine is a movement based on the document *A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*, which was written by a group of Palestinian Christians as a witness to the Israeli occupation. Taking its inspiration from a similar document written by South African Christians in witness to apartheid, the document asks for international solidarity against the occupation and for a just peace in Israel-Palestine.

The introduction to the Kairos document lays out its purpose:

“We, a group of Christian Palestinians, after prayer, reflection and an exchange of opinion, cry out from within the suffering in our country, under the Israeli occupation, with a cry of hope in the absence of all hope, a cry full of prayer and faith in a God ever vigilant, in God’s divine providence for all the inhabitants of this land. Inspired by the mystery of God’s love for all, the mystery of God’s divine presence in the history of all peoples and, in a particular way, in the history of our country, we proclaim our word based on our Christian faith and our sense of Palestinian belonging – a word of faith, hope and love.”¹

The *Kairos Palestine* documents the effect of the occupation on the Palestinian population. It recounts the daily humiliations and the legal and extra-legal barriers that Palestinians are forced to endure at the hands of their occupiers. Yet it is also a document of hope, grounded in realism. It later reads, “Hope is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble, and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit who is dwelling in us. From this vision derives the strength to be steadfast, remain firm and work to change the reality in which we find ourselves.”¹

The Kairos document has given birth to an international movement, whose genesis was in the Kairos conference held in Bethlehem in December 2011. The Bethlehem conference reiterated the call of Palestinian civil society and called for a comprehensive boycott of Israel as a non-violent tool for ending what it labelled the “Israeli apartheid system.” [See pp. 32-34 of *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace* for a discussion of some important differences between South African apartheid and the situation in Israel-Palestine.]

Kairos USA is part of that movement. Led by an interdenominational committee including several members of the PC (USA), Kairos USA issued its response to the Kairos document in 2012. The Kairos USA “Call to Action” calls Christians in the United States to a six-part program of action encompassing educating, building personal relationships, enriching worship and congregational life, engaging in theological reflection, participating in non-violent action, and advocating with the United States government. The response reads:

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We can no longer be silent; we can no longer betray the core of our Christian faith as expressed in Matthew 25: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”¹

Like the BDS movement, the Global Kairos movement is a response to Palestinian voices. In keeping with the missional theology of the 21st century Presbyterian Church (USA), it is important to remember our place in the work to be done. We are bound not to implement and impose, but to listen first to the voices of those whose reality we are addressing. The Global Kairos movement is a movement in solidarity with the people of Palestine, working with Palestinians and not for them.

Annex 2: THE BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT AND SANCTIONS MOVEMENT

The Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement (BDS) originated in Palestinian civil society in 2005, encouraging international economic pressure. It was put forward in light of the failure of political solutions, but renounces violent methods. The movement urges various forms of boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel until it meets its obligations under international law by:

- 1) Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall;
- 2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
- 3) Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.¹

The BDS call, modeled on similar activism against the apartheid-era South African government, is endorsed by numerous Palestinian political parties, trade unions, and other organizations.

Since its inception in 2005, BDS has grown into a global movement. It has particularly garnered support from academic bodies and student groups. Support from governments and business groups, particularly in Europe, has also grown significantly. Today the BDS movement can count among its successes divestment actions by state pension funds in Norway and Luxembourg and by financial and banking concerns in Denmark and New Zealand. Foreign aid to Israel has also been affected¹, due in part to BDS activism.

Some have criticized the BDS movement as anti-Semitic and as desiring the destruction of Israel, but that is not one of its aims. Opponents claim that the implication of letting all the refugees back in (without other political arrangements) would lead to a non-Jewish majority and hence the end of Israel as a Jewish state. The BDS movement, however, refuses to specify a political endgame or align itself with a political party.

Political measures against the BDS movement are growing, particularly in the United States. Anti-BDS legislation has been enacted at the federal level¹, along with similar measures in a number of state legislatures.¹ In its approval of *Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace*, the General Assembly 2016 “affirmed the traditional freedom of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other religious, civic, and private organizations in the United States to determine their own practices of investment or divestment, boycott or selective purchasing, in advocacy for peace and human rights, and therefore opposes efforts in state legislatures and elsewhere to limit or punish these exercises of freedom and nonviolent solidarity.” The 2016 Report did not endorse the specific BDS campaign platform, however, and neither did the 2014 action authorizing divestment from specific firms supporting the occupation. Hence the 2016 call for “prayerful study” of such an endorsement.

Annex 3: A Resolution of the 221st General Assembly (2014)

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL INHABITANTS OF ISRAEL AND PALESTINE AND
ON CONVERSATIONS WITH PROPHETIC VOICES

(The General Assembly is the highest policy-setting body of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The wording in bold type below represents the position of the church and is policy guiding the mission and witness of the agencies of the General Assembly and is advisory to all members. Following the language in bold is a rationale section designed to support the policy positions.)

Despite decades of General Assembly and other international support for the freedom and self-determination of the Palestinian people, yet recognizing that the right to vote and personal freedoms have been denied or limited for most Palestinians under occupation and within Israel, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy recommends that the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approve the following measures (a) to support equal rights and unblocked economic development for all inhabitants of Israel and the occupied territories including Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, and (b) to support the open and faithful discussion of this need for equal rights and legal standing within congregational and other forums:

A. Regarding the provision of equal rights, the General Assembly supports:

1. The establishment and protection of equal human rights for all inhabitants of Israel including:

- **the establishment and protection of equal human rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, giving them parity with “Jewish Nationals;”**
- **freedom of travel and worship, including legal protection for non-Jewish sites;**
- **full protection of property rights without penalty for absence from Israel for business, education, family, or personal reasons;**
- **unhindered opportunities for economic development; and**
- **benefit from U.S. of financial aid without identity-based discrimination or exclusion.**

2. The establishment and protection of equal human rights for all inhabitants of the occupied territories including Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza including:

- **fair due process for all Palestinian inhabitants of the occupied territories who are arrested, convicted, and imprisoned either by the Israeli Defense Force or the Palestinian Authority;**
- **the ability to marry residents of other Palestinian areas without losing residency;**
- **special care in protecting the human rights of children;**
- **freedom of travel and worship;**
- **full protection of property rights, including freedom from arbitrary or unjust home demolitions;**
- **unhindered opportunities for economic development, including full access to international economic aid without identity-based discrimination; and**
- **access to tax revenues illegally sequestered.**

3. Measures to ensure free and fair elections within the Palestinian territories, Israeli zones of control or in whatever political realities may be created by the current peace process, with the provision of election and human rights observers as necessary.

B. Regarding open and prophetic discussion of Palestinian human rights within congregational and other forums:

- 1. Affirms the position of the 219th General Assembly (2010) that “Views with respect the integrity of the religious faiths of Jews, Muslims, and other peoples, the value of non-coercion in religious life, and the benefits of public toleration of religious diversity to diminish extremism, discrimination, and bigotry” (Minutes, 2010, Part I, p. 1025) and encourages congregations to host conversations that include diversity within as well as among religious traditions represented;**
- 2. Encourages Presbyterian congregations to reach out to neighboring synagogues, temples, and mosques as possible to explore nonviolent ways to promote peace with justice in Israel and Palestine, and recommends the shared reading of texts from the Hebrew prophets as a particular starting point in conversation with New Testament and Quranic texts on the nature of human dignity, the shared image of God, and universal human rights;**
- 3. Recommends the inclusion of a full range of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian viewpoints in conversations, including the increasing number of prophetic voices committed to nonviolence and equal rights;**
- 4. Requests the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, in consultation with the Middle East office and other Presbyterian Mission Agency offices, to produce suitable resources for such conversations. [This resource is in partial fulfillment of that request].**