

## WHAT HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

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### 1. Introduction

**1.1** The Church and Society Council's Supplementary Report on Israel-Palestine published in 2006 following the elections in Israel and Palestine concluded with this sentence: *We want to bring a report in 2007 that can speak of a realistic hope; much progress will need to be seen before those suffering now can reach out for that hope, and hold it as their own.*

**1.2** We therefore set out in this report to look for hope. We do so at the end of a period in which missiles have continued to be fired and bombs dropped, when desperation and resentment have continued to grow, and when little progress seems to have been achieved. It is also a time in which a ceasefire has been announced in Gaza, which the Israeli government claims is maintained only because they have shown much restraint in refusing to rise to the provocation of continued rocket attacks over the border. Palestinians too might claim that they have shown restraint – as the separation barrier continues to ruin their businesses, cut off their farms, and blight their lives. Our task may be seen by many to be doomed to failure; Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States of America, finishes his recent book on Palestine with words that speak not so much of hope as of dread: *“without progress toward peace, desperation or adventurism on either side could precipitate a [nuclear] confrontation.”*

**1.3** At Christmas, English church leaders visited Bethlehem to search for and to offer hope – their presence designed to be an act of pastoral solidarity with the Christian community. The Archbishop of Canterbury addressed the city's civic representatives, stressing that problems had to be solved by people working together. One-sided solutions would not deliver justice, he said: *“... in this so troubled, complex land ... justice and security is never something which one person claims at the expense of another or one community at the expense of another. We are here to say that security for one is security for all. For one to live under threat, whether of occupation, or of terror, is a problem for all, and a pain for all.”*

**1.4** Dr Williams said the pilgrimage was intended as a sign of hope: *“We are not here to visit an ancient and interesting site. We are not here to visit a museum and we are not here to visit a theme park. We are here to visit a place and people whose very existence speaks of the freedom of God to set human beings free. That is a truth which remains day after day, year after year, millennium after millennium. It is that good news that has driven us here. It is that good news which teaches us not to despair even in the terrible circumstances in which so many of you now live.”*

**1.5** All year round, however, the churches of the world (including Scotland) are present both through their congregations on the ground and also through the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The EAPPI is an initiative of the World Council of Churches under the *Ecumenical Campaign to End the Illegal Occupation of Palestine: Support a Just Peace in the Middle East*. Its mission is to accompany Palestinians and Israelis in their non-violent actions and concerted advocacy efforts to end the occupation. Participants of the programme are monitoring and reporting violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, supporting acts of non-violent resistance alongside local Christian and Muslim Palestinians and Israeli peace activists, offering protection through non-violent presence, engaging in public policy advocacy and, in general, standing in solidarity with the churches and all those struggling against the occupation. Pim Bendt, an accompanier from Sweden, wrote this just before Christmas:

**1.6** *Rabbis for Human Rights contacted us yesterday evening, as they were a few volunteers short in the northern West Bank. Many Palestinians with olive groves close to aggressive settlements had requested accompaniers for the olive harvest this year.*

*One and a half hours and two checkpoints later we have covered the 20 miles to Huwwarra. Above us to the West, the settlement of Har Bracha rests like a medieval castle, with guard towers, barbed wire, and fences. The family whom we have come to assist have their land on the slopes below these aggressive and ideologically motivated settlers. On our way up we cross blackened fields. The settlers set fire to them last week.*

*When we reach the first terrace, the rain starts pounding down. I notice a large group of soaking wet people moving among the trees on the terrace below. "Hello up there!" They are a group of Israeli volunteers who have come from other olive groves in the area, where farmers chose to go home because of the rain. They have been bussed up here in the early morning from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to help Palestinian farmers harvest their olives. Several of them are older; one is even struggling through the rubble and mud with a cane. I look around me at all the people among the leaves and feel tears come to my eyes. I let them come.*

*A few hours later when Rabbi Aschermann himself has arrived I hear him talking to two Canadian journalists "...maybe we manage to restore some hope. To let Palestinians and Israelis pick the olives of this land together. To let these Palestinian families see that there are other Israelis than the settlers who take their land and cut their trees and the soldiers who passively let them do it."*

**1.7** EAPPI seeks to promote hope and to provide it, to show struggling people by their presence that they are not alone or forgotten. Are there, however, broader themes of hope which can be discerned? Or indeed are there false hopes being offered which need to be revealed? In this report we look at the hope that might lie in democratic politics, because much is often made of the importance of the spread of democracy in the Middle East.

**1.8** Democracy is often promoted by the powers of the West as the answer to all the problems of and the real hope for the Middle East. It is, however, not as simple as that. Firstly, it is promoted with varying degrees of enthusiasm in different countries of the region – depending, so it seems, on the degree to which the ruling regime is friendly toward the interests of the West. Secondly, this promotion appears to take little account of the cultural specificities of the country concerned. And thirdly, there are evidently limits to the choices it is permissible for these electorates to make – how easy is it, should it be, or do we make it, to move from the actions and rhetoric of protest and violence to the positive contribution of government?

**1.9** It is often suggested, not least by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, that finding a political answer to the issue of Palestine is the key to hope for the whole Middle East. We look at prospects for such a political hope. And, because of the events of the past year, we will look at what happens when politics loses control – and examine the 2006 conflict between Israel and Lebanon, and the reaction to it.

**1.10** Finally, in section five we look at theology – and this for two reasons. Firstly, the Patriarch and local heads of churches in Jerusalem decided last summer to sound a warning about the dangers to the Holy Land of what has come to be known as Christian Zionism; we thought it important both to report this and to reflect on it. But, secondly, we had communication from a member of the Church of Scotland expressing great concern about the preaching of this very ideology in Scotland – and for this reason too we thought it important that the General Assembly be given the opportunity to discuss the hope which theology can offer – and to ask if Christian Zionism is a real hope or a false one. The report is clear that we see in this way of thinking the same dangers that are described by the church leaders of Jerusalem.

## **2. The Politics of Hope**

If political life is to be an answer in the Middle East to the instability that so undermines that region, it will need to be based on democratic institutions, which enable people to participate meaningfully and non-violently in everyday life. Autocratic, intolerant or militarised rule will not, in the long run, provide a basis for peaceful coexistence. It is taken for granted that democracy is a *sine qua non* for a modern nation and, in the case of the Middle East, the EU and USA are prepared to foster it in some states. The development of democracy in the Middle East is regarded by much political strategy as central to a stable and peaceful region.

While free and fair elections are necessary for this to come about, they are not in themselves sufficient. There are other areas which are just as important. We want in this section to look at some of these, and examine briefly different countries in the Middle East to see if these elements are present. This might begin to examine Israel's claim to be the only democracy in the Middle East.

### **2.1 Elections**

**2.1.1** For democracy to be genuine there has to be genuine choice. The state electoral commission must be free of political bias, and must only exclude parties that threaten the rule of law in the state. That rule of law must guarantee freedom of expression, non-interference with the right of a party to publish, print and distribute election material, and security for all party workers going about their legitimate business. State laws that protect a ruling dynasty or party deny democracy.

**2.1.2** Lebanon has a President and a National Assembly. The National Assembly is split 50/50 between Muslims and Christians – by constituency; this means that candidates in a constituency will only be opposed by co-religionists. (The arrangement for religion-based constituencies is designed to eliminate the internecine strife that pitched Lebanon into many years of civil war.) There are 128 seats in the National Assembly, with a five year term. Voters must be over 21 and in residence in Lebanon. A list system operates, and political parties are lists of candidates endorsed by prominent individuals. Coalitions are formed locally between clan and religious leaders. No party has ever won more than 12.5% of the vote and no coalition has won more than 35%. The 2005 election was judged fair by international observers.

**2.1.3** Jordan is a Kingdom where the king has the power to appoint the Prime Minister. There is a two-chamber National Assembly, with the Senate appointed by the king. The House of Representatives has 110 seats (six reserved for women, nine for Christians, three for Circassians, nine for Bedouin), and a four year term. Voters must be over 18. There are 44

multi-member constituencies. The last election was judged fair by the International Parliamentary Union.

**2.1.4** Egypt has a President, a People's Assembly and an Advisory Council. The People's Assembly has 454 seats (400 by PR in two seat constituencies, 44 single seat and ten appointed by the President to represent minority parties, women and Copts); The term is five years. The Advisory Council has 264 seats (176 elected, 88 appointed) with a term of six years, half standing down every three years. Mohammed Hosni Mubarak has been President since October 14, 1981. His presidency was renewed for a fifth six-year term after he won the first contested presidential election in Egypt's history on September 7, 2005. The 2005 elections were the first to be overseen by the judiciary. No foreign observers were permitted, but foreign journalists were permitted inside polling stations.

**2.1.5** Iraq now has a President, and a National Assembly of 245 seats (allocated according to size of population and religious, ethnic, political support). 18 provinces are taken as separate constituencies; there is a four year term; voters must be over 18. One third of candidates must be women. International observers thought the electoral process went well.

**2.1.6** Palestine has a President, and a National Assembly of 132 seats (66 District candidates and 66 proportional representation National List candidates); these are elected every four years by Palestinians over 18. Each candidate list must include one woman in the first three names, and a diminishing percentage thereafter. There are six seats for Christians on the Palestine Legislative Council. The elections of January 2006 were judged to be fairly and transparently conducted.

**2.1.7** Israel has a President with a seven-year term, and the Knesset, which has 120 seats elected by PR from nationwide party lists, (a 2% vote is enough to merit some parliamentary representation). Elections are held every four years among all citizens over 18, and these elections are conducted well. Governments are formed through coalitions.

**2.1.8** All the Middle Eastern nations referred to have national parliamentary systems that are based on PR, arguably more democratic than the UK first past the post system. Their levels of democracy, if democracy can be viewed as an absolute, vary considerably:

- Lebanon has an arrangement designed to be even-handed to two major religious groups (which can be compared to arrangements developed in N Ireland).
- Jordan has an influential position for the monarch (much as the United Kingdom had in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century); and changing the local government constitution (for whatever reason) by restoring power to the monarch is certainly a retrograde step.
- Egypt is a late starter on presidential elections, its elections procedures are not transparent, and banning political parties is far from the spirit of democratic practice.
- Iraq has the benefit of a modern electoral system, brought about by a regime change, which raised expectations but has had unlooked-for cataclysmic consequences.
- The Palestinian system is open, with a free vote for all.
- The Israeli system has some similarities with the practice and conduct of European democracies, though its low threshold for the participation of minority parties – and the consequent influence these parties can have on coalitions – distinguishes it.
- The fact that small numbers of seats for women are set aside in Jordan and Egypt is tokenism, but is to be welcomed as a precursor to more women being encouraged to participate in political life.

## **2.2 Consistent Governance**

**2.2.1** Allied to the conduct of elections is the smooth transfer of power and the consistency of governance. Politically neutral civil servants, electoral officials, armed forces and police

owing their allegiance only to the state, as represented by its elected parliament, are essential for the peaceful and orderly transfer of power from one party to another.

**2.2.2** Israel has a multi-party democracy. The voting system ensures political volatility and uncertainty, with any governing party relying on coalition partners. There are often dangerous tensions between ultra religious and more secular parties. And divisions between left and right have important implications for a peace process. The current Israeli Cabinet includes the leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party, who advocates "exchanges of populations and territory, in order to create the most homogeneously Jewish state," which is not in tune with the Prime Minister's view that Israeli Arabs should have equal rights.

**2.2.3** The Palestinian Authority's democratic system has been abused. Instability has been caused by the deep rift between Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the one hand, and the various components of the PLO on the other. The story in recent years has been of inefficient bureaucracy and significant corruption.

**2.2.4** Jordan, as we saw above, is a "Monarchical Democracy". It has a strong constitution with universal suffrage. The Parliament has strong powers but the Palace has the final say. There is general respect for human rights, but there are some abuses by the authorities. Stability can be seen as the legacy of the late King Hussein, and the system works and survives by popular consent.

**2.2.5** Lebanon is a deeply divided society, whose complicated constitution reflects and perpetuates the divisions. Central Government is weak and rules by a series of compromises. This fragility is put under further strain from external (Syrian/Iranian) and internal (Hezbollah, Christian radical, Sunni) pressures. The wounds of the civil war have not been healed, and the country could fall apart again – especially if no progress is made in the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), or if there is further conflict with Israel or an increase in Syrian influence and involvement.

**2.2.6** Syria is an autocracy ruled by the Alawite minority, which controls the ruling Ba'ath party centred around the Bashar al Assad dynasty, still dominated by the former President Assad's allies. It is an old Soviet style party system, with heavily controlled media and cult of the personality. There is continuing abuse of human rights, but the situation has improved somewhat since the regime of Hafiz Al Assad.

**2.2.7** Iran's political system can best be described as complicated. It has a Supreme Leader, chosen or sacked by the Assembly of Experts. He is *inter alia* Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The Assembly of Experts is made up of 86 virtuous clerics elected for an eight year term by adult suffrage. The President is elected for four years by all Iranians over 18, and must command an absolute majority. The President then appoints and supervises the Council of Ministers, coordinates government decisions, and selects government policies to be placed before the legislature. Currently, ten Vice-Presidents serve under the President, as well as a cabinet of 21 ministers, who must all be approved by the legislature. The Consultative Assembly (legislature) has 290 members elected for four-year terms; it drafts legislation, ratifies international treaties, and approves the national budget. All candidates and all legislation from the Assembly must be approved by the Council of Guardians, which is comprised of 12 people; it interprets the constitution and may reject bills thought to be incompatible with the constitution or Sharia (Islamic law). The Council has in the past drawn upon a narrow interpretation of Iran's constitution to veto parliamentary candidates. The Expediency Council has the authority to mediate disputes between the Consultative Assembly and the Council of Guardians, and serves as an advisory body to the Supreme Leader, making it one of the most powerful governing bodies in the country. There are also local councils. Aware of the increasing importance of Iran and the issues surrounding it, the Council intends to produce a report on this subject for the 2008 General Assembly.

### **2.3 *Respect for Minorities***

**2.3.1** Democratic politics are not simply about the dictatorship of the majority. It is important that minorities are not trampled over, or given lesser human rights protection.

**2.3.2** In Israel, in spite of there being Arab MPs and now an Arab member of the Cabinet, there appears to be a distrust of Arab minorities. The Israeli constitutional position of being a Jewish state means that there is discrimination against non-Jews, who nevertheless have significant (but not equal) political rights. The rule of law and the independence of judiciary generally prevails when not in conflict with the constitution.

**2.3.3** Within the Palestinian Authority there is a good record ethnically and religiously (if not politically) and the Christian community is influential in the private sector of business and the economy.

**2.3.4** Jordan has the protection of minorities built into the constitution. There are reserved seats in the National Assembly for Christians (4% of population) and Circassians (1%). Muslims are 99% Sunni. There are some anti-Christian elements in its religiously-based legislation. Palestinians (perhaps 65% of the population) have full civil and legal rights, and are fully integrated into the system and society with equal legal rights, though a glass ceiling exists, especially in the military and security services.

**2.3.5** Lebanon's confessionally based constitution contains protection for minorities, and was originally predicated on a Christian majority. The religious breakdown of the country is not known precisely as there has, quite deliberately, been no census since the 1930s.

**2.3.6** In Syria the Ba'athist regime prides itself on religious and ethnic toleration. There are small Jewish and significant Christian and Kurdish minorities protected by law. One reason for the lack of religious discrimination is that the ruling Alawite clique is itself a breakaway Islamic sect (thought by some orthodox Sunnis and Shia to be heretical).

### **2.4 *The Wrong Answer?***

**2.4.1** Politicians and voters in developed and stable democracies are accustomed to coming to terms with the "wrong" outcome at an election, and with coming to terms with a period of opposition. Other nations, whatever their political view, have to come to terms with new regimes in friendly nations. When a nation or authority carries out a fairly and transparently conducted election it is entitled to continued recognition from interested nations, even if they do not like the outcome. Learning to accept and live with an electoral answer that one does not like is a fact of life in democratic politics. There have been times in the Middle East, however, when measures have been taken to avoid the "wrong" answer.

**2.4.2** In Egypt in the legislative elections in 2005 there was wide-scale violence. Police prevented voters who support Muslim Brothers from casting their votes in some provinces. Many judges proclaimed to the media that they witnessed incidents of forgery. Egypt's Judges Club issued a statement on December 2 affirming that the executive authorities did not enable them to have full supervision over the electoral process because the police besieged many polling stations and blocked voters from casting their votes.

**2.4.3** In Jordan municipal elections, which were previously direct, now only elect 50% of councillors, with the rest being appointed by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs – to counter the Islamic Labour Front's successes of 1999.

**2.4.4** Lebanon has Hezbollah represented in its government, which enjoys much support, and wants a larger share of power. Following earlier demonstrations, strikes became employed to push this agenda. On 23 January 2007, the BBC website reported:

*Thousands of demonstrators have paralysed much of Lebanon, barricading roads as part of a strike aimed at toppling the government. Dozens of people were injured in Beirut as government supporters confronted opposition protesters in bouts of stone throwing, fist fights and gunfire. The protesters blocked roads into Beirut with barricades and burning tyres, and flights were cancelled. The Hezbollah-led opposition called the strike and is urging fresh elections. The protesters see the government as being too close to the West, and accuse it of bankrupting Lebanon. Pro-Western Lebanese leaders accuse strike leaders of staging a coup.*

**2.4.5** The Palestinian elections of 2006 produced a Hamas majority: Hamas found itself on the cusp of transition from an armed resistance organisation to being a genuine political party (much as Sinn Fein/IRA and many others have done). This is a difficult move, from guerrilla warfare to *realpolitik*. The outcome did not meet the universal approval in the USA, EU and Israel, and funding was withdrawn from the Palestinian authority because of Hamas' policy in relation to Israel, which refuses to recognise the country and advocates its eventual abolition.

**2.4.6** The International Development Committee of the UK Parliament produced a report in January 2007 on the current situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmintdev/114/114i.pdf>). It describes the dire and worsening situation of the Palestinians which results from the withholding of revenues as a result of the Hamas refusal to recognise Israel; the report states: "the international community's policy of isolating a democratically elected government is questionable under conditions of ongoing conflict ... the international community is in danger of preventing the creation of a viable Palestinian state."

**2.4.7** As with Northern Ireland, negotiation is the only answer – though it will never keep everyone happy. Yesterday's terrorist often develops into today's or tomorrow's politician. For example, Menachem Begin, Prime Minister of Israel 1977-1983, had earlier been a member of Irgun, an armed resistance organisation fighting the British occupiers. This history was actually commemorated last July by the unveiling of a plaque outside the King David Hotel, to mark the bombing there in 1946 that killed 92 people and helped drive the British from Palestine.

**2.4.8** To achieve the transition, time and support is required. To condemn and punish the outcome of an asked for democratic process, because the outcome is not what an outside nation hoped for, makes a mockery of the democratic principle. The newly elected representatives have to be courted, persuaded, and exposed to the vagaries of international diplomacy, while they are struggling to move from the politics of rhetoric and revolution to the politics of delivering on the expectations of their voters – security, health, education, housing, and jobs. None of this can be achieved if they are being subverted, overtly or covertly, by outsiders. If that is the case, disillusionment with democracy will set in; and people will revert to support of the simple-solution demagogues.

**2.4.9** This reaction to electoral results points up the issue of pressure from outside – on what is appropriate or inappropriate, positive or negative. As we shall see in the coming sections on Israel-Palestine and on Lebanon, the negative impact comes when an outside power uses their influence and military or economic muscle to support one side against another. The really positive impact is possible when those outside refuse to be dragged in to internal fights, but rather seeks justice for those who are the victims of the fighting – the poor, the old, the very young, the ill, the powerless, those who simply want to live their lives in dignity and peace. Western powers are keen to point to Iran or Syria when they are seen to be interfering; but they need to be self aware enough to turn the same spotlight on themselves.

### **3. Israel and Palestine**

We asked Peter Hinchcliffe, former United Kingdom Ambassador to Jordan and Honorary Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, to give us his assessment of the current situation in Israel and Palestine. He is the author of “*Jordan, a Hashemite Legacy*” and “*Conflicts in the Middle East Since 1945*” (both published by Routledge, 2001). His analysis now follows.

*3.1 On the ground the situation remains dire, with Israel having taken almost continuous military action against Palestinians in Gaza since the departure of the settlers in September 2005. These operations were initially (and currently) - in response to the firing of crude home made ‘Qassam’ rockets by Palestinian militants into Israel (some 1,700 have been fired) and, more recently, as retaliation for the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier in June 2006. According to BBC statistics (1) Palestinian rockets have killed three civilians in Israel, two of them Arabs, since the start of the year. At the same time some 300 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli military action including more than 60 children. 18 members of the same family were killed at Beit Hanoun by Israeli artillery as they slept in their beds. Altogether 50 Palestinians lost their lives in the attack on this town. As part of these operations, Human Rights Watch has estimated that Israel has fired 15,000 artillery shells since September 2005 inflicting considerable damage on the area infrastructure. There is now an uneasy ceasefire but the confrontation with Israeli security forces has been replaced by a virtual civil war between Hamas militants and supporters of the Palestinian President as representing the PLO. In consequence the economy of Gaza is in a state of collapse and the UN World Food Programme has calculated 70% of the population is, in the jargon, “food insecure”. Unemployment is very high throughout the area and the international embargo on aid donors to Hamas run Palestinian Authority (PA) has exacerbated an already disastrously weak economy. Moreover Israel has refused to hand over money due to the Palestinians under revenue sharing agreements negotiated some years ago because of their refusal to have any formal dealings with Hamas. Following the carnage in Gaza the Arab League, on 13 November, voted to break the international embargo but it is uncertain how money can reach the PA: banks have been enforcing the blockade out of fear of American sanctions. It is thought that assistance from Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia is, perforce, in the form of cash but this can only be a temporary stop gap operation.*

*3.2 As with the Israeli campaign against Hezbollah and its attacks on targets in Lebanon last summer, as commentators have pointed out, the artillery attacks and military incursions are not proportionate to the threat faced by the state. John Dugard, the UN Human Rights Investigator on the West Bank, has categorised the attacks as a brutal collective punishment of a people, not a government. And more recently the UN Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour stated during a tour of Gaza: ‘The violation of human rights in this territory is massive. The call for protection has to be answered. We cannot continue to see civilians, who are not the authors of their own misfortune, suffer to the extent of what I see’ (2). Since the killing of a third Israeli – a woman – on 14 November, the Israelis have promised severe retaliation but in the event, and somewhat unexpectedly, settled for a ceasefire which remains largely intact.*

*3.3 The political context continues to be highly unpromising. Neither the Palestinian leadership nor the Israeli government appears to have a coherent policy for dealing with the crisis. Since the election of a Hamas majority legislature and the appointment of a Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniya, Israel has refused to have official contacts with the Palestine administration. Before any dealings can take place the Israeli government insists that Hamas formally recognises Israel’s right of existence. This Hamas consistently refuses to do. So the posture has been one of hostile confrontation with no attempt to enter into negotiations. Indeed as part of the response to the capture of the Israeli soldier in June, the Israelis arrested one third of the Palestinian Cabinet as part of its operations in Gaza. Moreover since the operations against Hezbollah which ended inconclusively, Ehud Olmert’s position as Israeli Prime Minister has been severely weakened and he has felt obliged to include a notoriously anti-Palestinian hard liner in his cabinet to bolster support from the political*

right. This will not be conducive to starting up the negotiating process, which is unlikely anyhow unless a formula can be found for ending the current hostilities in Gaza.

**3.4** *On the Palestinian side Hamas and its main rival, Fatah (the party of the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas), have been at loggerheads leading to sporadic violence involving rival militias and the Palestinian Police. Fatah was humiliated at the polls mainly because of its record of corruption and administrative incompetence and has found it hard to come to terms with its defeat. Israeli attacks on Gaza, especially the recent assault on Beit Hanoun, appeared to encourage the Palestinian factions to restart negotiations to form a government of national unity including a new compromise Prime Minister, who would not be a member of Hamas. It was hoped that this would encourage the international community to recognise the new administration and lift the official economic boycott imposed on a Hamas led Palestinian Authority. These talks have broken down several times and seem unlikely to succeed whilst there is so much anger against Israel and its aggressive policies and whilst the two factions take to the streets as part of an internecine struggle for supremacy. Before the recent ceasefire, public support for the Palestinian militants had grown and there is an increasing resentment at the apparent unwillingness of the West to exercise any restraint on Israel or to show any sympathy for (or indeed understanding of) the sufferings of the Palestinian people.*

**3.5** *It will not only require new approaches by the Palestinians and Israelis to kick start the stalled peace process but a concerted effort by the international community in support. We have discussed the disarray in which the principals find themselves. Only the two leaderships can galvanise their peoples into making fresh efforts to negotiate a just, comprehensive and lasting peace. The omens are currently not propitious. Concerted and even handed outside pressure on and support for both parties will also be necessary. Experience has shown that it is only the government of the United States, which has the necessary leverage with Tel Aviv significantly to influence its policies. But experience has also shown that Washington's influence can achieve little when Israel believes its national interests, and especially its security, is under significant threat.*

**3.6** *Under the Republican Administration of President George W Bush, USA and Israeli interests have been closely intertwined. As Sir Christopher Meyer, the former British Ambassador to Washington recently pointed out (3) the only special relationship which really matters to the Americans is that with Israel. Israeli affairs are a US domestic issue, not one primarily of foreign policy. The strength of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) sees to that. Israel has cleverly exploited US obsession with the "War on Terror" to reinforce its position as Washington's strategic partner in the Middle East. Its campaign against Hezbollah was presented in this light, as was the isolation of Chairman Arafat, the late Palestinian leader during the premiership of Ariel Sharon. The influence of the "fundamentalist" Christian Zionists on neo-conservative elements within the American administration has been pernicious and significant, increasing high level often knee jerk support for Israel and her policies towards the Palestinians.*

**3.7** *The success of the Democrats at the November mid term elections, achieving a majority in both houses of Congress, may offer some hope for a more imaginative, flexible and even-handed approach to Israel/Palestine. The power of the "neo-cons" will be much reduced, and it is also a setback for those of a Christian Zionist tendency whose support for Israel, based on distorted biblical interpretation (see below), has been generally uncritical and unconditional. However it needs to be remembered that AIPAC has traditionally had a better relationship with the Democrats than with the Republicans (seen by some as the Party of Oil and therefore suspiciously anxious for a good relationship with the Arab oil states) and its position of considerable influence at the heart of government will remain undiminished. A small glimmer of hope arises out of attempts by the US to extricate itself from the morass of Iraq. Much may depend on a report produced by James Baker, a former Secretary of State and a close associate of the Bush family. As widely predicted Baker emphasised the*

*importance of Israel/Palestine as the major issue in the Middle East (as Mr Blair did in his recent foreign policy speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet). But President Bush may still need to be convinced that as much energy needs to be put into Arab/Israel as into Iraq.*

*3.8 He might recognise that a successful resolution to the question of Palestine will not in itself, necessarily, lead to a beneficial outcome in Iraq. But if Washington can be seen to be determined to use its clout with Israel to create the conditions for kick starting the MEPP – which will involve achieving a considerable softening in Israel's policies and practices – and is seen to be focused on achieving a just, comprehensive and lasting solution, this will have significant benefits for Washington's Iraq policy. Amongst them might be a better relationship with Syria and other regional countries with a shared interest in a peaceful and united Iraq. Already there are moves afoot in the USA to seek to engage Syria and Iran as part of an exit strategy for Iraq. Obviously regional support for an even-handed and determined USA (and other Western) approach to Israel/Palestine will take considerable heat out of the issue regionally. It will also help defuse the strong feelings of frustration and anger at Western policies towards the Islamic world in such countries as the UK, with its large Muslim communities. The UK's apparent unwillingness to challenge the US over not only involvement in Iraq but in its support for Israeli actions against the Palestinians (and recently its operation in Lebanon), engenders strong feelings of anger and encourages accusations of a one sided anti-Muslim or anti-Arab foreign policy in defence of a USA client state in the Middle East, which thus is able to act with impunity. This, together with draconian anti-terrorist legislation that many British Muslims believe to be directed purely and indiscriminately against them as the "enemy within", makes it inevitable that there is a significant level of support within these communities for acts of terror against the state. Changing our strategy in the Middle East will do much to turn down the heat and reduce active support for Islamic activists.*

*3.9 The difficulties are immense. A Democrat controlled Congress is not going to revolutionise US policy overnight. Indeed on the contrary, it could lead to drift rather than positive activity with a lame duck president hamstrung by a hostile and unhelpful legislature. National unity will be as necessary in the USA as in Palestine and Israel. And on the ground in Palestine itself even the eventual establishment of a PA national unity government will only be a tiny step in the right direction. It could even complicate the situation. Unless it is led by someone acceptable to the Americans (and probably by extension, the Israelis) it could still remain an international pariah if it fails to meet the three conditions for recognition laid down by the "Quartet" (US, EU, UN and Russia): recognise Israel, renounce violence, and accept previous Israeli-PA agreements. Recognition of Israel will remain anathema to Hamas radicals and Israel will need to be persuaded to make major concessions (eg significant releases of Palestinian detainees, freezing the security wall, removal of some settlements, end all incursions) before this could become a realistic option. Recognition of Israel is the most important card in Hamas' pack and will only be played with the greatest reluctance and for maximum advantage.*

*3.10 According to the Economist (4) Lt. General Keith Dayton, the US security envoy to the Palestinians, has suggested to the Quartet that rather than pursue the chimera of a PA unity government they should support the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas "by whatever means necessary" to help him take on Hamas. Apparently, and not surprisingly, the other members of the Quartet have balked at this as "tantamount to backing one side in a future civil war". On top of all this bad news it is worth remembering that even if, by some miracle, Israeli/Palestinian peace talks do get going again, and even given a modicum of good will and flexibility on both sides the major issues to be resolved are as daunting as ever: the demarcation of the final boundaries of a Palestinian State; the extent of its authority – full sovereignty or something less; the site of its capital; the future of the refugees (the vexing issue of the "right to return"); the question of the future of the Israeli settlements on the West Bank, 38% of which are on Palestinian privately owned land; the Golan heights (which will*

*need Syrian involvement). These are the final status issues that have only been tiptoed round as too difficult for now in all the negotiations, even those which so nearly reached a successful conclusion. And even the so-called Road Map is only aimed at creating the best possible conditions for a discussion of these issues and not a blue print for their solution.*

**3.11** *Are there any grounds for the faintest scrap of optimism? As indicated above much will depend on how desperately the US, and to a lesser extent its Western partners, want to extricate themselves from the quagmire called Iraq. If the calculation is, as it should be, that the goodwill and active co-operation of regional players will be necessary to help with this, then there must be a good chance that Washington will turn its attention to the MEPP with the same commitment and intelligence as was shown by President Clinton. This will need, in Washington, a bipartisan approach and it will also need a real determination to pursue strategic US interests rather than being seen to be purely protecting Israeli ones. This is an instance where the Americans need the Arabs more than they need the Israelis. And somehow, as part of this one final concerted push for peace, Israel will need to be convinced that its long term security, its continued and unchallenged existence, lies in living in peace with its neighbours – security arising from peace and not the other way round. It is a lot to ask for given the turbulence of the last few years not to mention recent images emerging of Palestinian fighting Palestinian, and it would be wrong to expect that the chances of success are more than minuscule.*

**3.12** *In the short term something needs urgently to be done to alleviate the sufferings of the Palestinians. And the first step should be to find a formula which allows the full resumption of international assistance to the West Bank and Gaza despite the current international boycott of a Hamas PA administration, the shunning of a government which was returned at the polls as the result of an internationally recognised free and fair election. Further deterioration of the economic situation in Palestine, increasing poverty and despair, will continue to serve as the best recruiting sergeant for those radicals and militants who see no option but to resort to violence as the only outlet for their hopelessness and frustration. And in such circumstances radical Islam, feeding on the abject misery of an oppressed people will inevitably prosper to the detriment of all who work for peace and justice in the Middle East.*

**3.13** In terms of the original aim of this report, to find hope for the future, this assessment does not offer much. It recognises, as we all must, that real steps toward real peace demand of those most closely involved measures they may find impossible. Hamas is asked to recognise an Israel whose borders are not defined – certainly not agreed. Israel is asked to remove from the occupied territories a population greater than that of Aberdeen. Indeed, we begin to wonder if the continued expansion of the settlements may have denied Israel the possibility of what it claims as its principal diplomatic objective – a two-state solution. And it should be remembered in this regard that the settlements are in direct contradiction to the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits occupying powers from moving their own population on to the occupied land.

**3.14** Within Palestine too there has been little cause for hope, as the feuds between Hamas and Fatah have frequently threatened to descend into civil war. In January, church leaders in Jerusalem first appealed for an end to the internecine strife, and then offered to mediate. *“Fighting and kidnapping opponents will not bring down the Separation Wall or end the embargo on the Palestinian people,”* they said, *“Bloodshed and violence will not bring peace; it will only further destroy family life and further endanger the economy of our land.”*

**3.15** From the outside little clear thinking or constructive engagement was evident. The prospect mentioned by Peter Hinchcliffe, of the United States deciding to back one side of a potential civil war rather than seek to avert it, seemed to have become US policy – with direct aid to arm President Abbas. Many in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere have seen a solution of the Israel-Palestine “problem” as a key to any hope for the Middle

East as a whole. Whether that is true or not, and we begin to suspect it may not be, there can be no hope that depends on backing and arming one side (previous experience of that kind of strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq ought to make that crystal clear). Helping all sides step back from seeing arms as an answer ought always to have been the priority, as the church leaders of Jerusalem made clear. As Peter Hinchcliffe pointed out, security comes from peace and not the other way round.

**3.16** Gareth Evans, President of the International Crisis Group and former Foreign Minister of Australia, said on 12 January 2007 at a conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict (5):

*From Cambodia in the 1980s to Darfur today I have never seen any set of conflict issues on which there is such a huge and depressing gap between, on the one hand, the collective awareness of what needs to be done and, on the other hand, collective impotence when it comes to doing it.*

**3.17** His plea was for outside parties to do five things:

- Do no harm: so the USA, for example, should cease hindering Palestinian unity by backing and arming one side; and should help Hamas on its road to recognising Israel rather than dismissing any such possibility.
- Help create the best conditions for negotiations: which makes demands on many people, including the Arab League and Syria, who are asked to “reach out” to the Israeli people in a way which allows their representatives to move.
- Assist in preparations for negotiations: this is about process, and could be helped by European unity on the issues, but should not get bogged down in negotiations about conferences rather than those dealing with the real issues.
- Assist in the conduct of the negotiations: perhaps by the Quartet putting down its own ideas at the outset – concentrating minds on the outcome rather than on the process as the main issue.
- Assist in implementing agreements: the provision of necessary economic, political and military support.

**3.18** After that the two Palestinian factions were brought together by Saudi Arabia in an attempt to form a unity government. This step was encouraged by religious leaders. Sheikh Tamini, Islamic Chief Judge in territories under the Palestinian Authority, and Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan both called on the Palestinian factions to use their brains rather than their arms, and to develop peaceful, non-violent strategies. In Geneva, the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation spoke of the importance of this “essential compromise”. Its content appears to include recognition by Hamas of previous agreements between Fatah and Israel, with President Abbas (Abu Mazen) still pushing Hamas to recognise Israel. Worryingly, rather than see this compromise as a step forward, the American administration argued that it made it more difficult to work with Abbas. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice suggested that it might also make it difficult for Prime Minister Olmert to continue to meet with the Palestinian President. Olmert, however, said that, “There will be a dialogue, and we will continue the communication channel with Abu Mazen. We will not accept a situation in which we have no channels of communication with the Palestinian public.”

**3.19** There is clearly no easy solution, no one step that will achieve everything – but there are certainly priorities. While other negotiations continue, or while they are planned for, the first priority must surely be to address the grinding and increasing poverty of the Palestinians – caused in part by the continual loss of land and water to settlements and the security barrier, in part by lack of employment, and in large part by the economic blockade of a democratically elected government. This last is within the compass of the UK government to address directly, and it is time that the policy on this was changed – because its effect is to make matters worse for all concerned.

**3.20** A joint, multi-country church advocacy initiative to mark 40 years of occupation is being convened by the WCC. It is called “International Church Action for Peace in Palestine and Israel, June 3-9, 2007”. A pilot project of the same name was carried out last year in March with participants in 13 countries. The Council will keep in touch with this initiative.

#### **Notes to Section 3**

1. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/6136980.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6136980.stm). An excellent analysis by Jeremy Bowen, the BBC Middle East Editor
2. 20 November 2006. Quoted in the *Guardian* 21 November.
3. On the *Today Programme*
4. 18 November. P.61
5. Madrid +15 Conference *Toward Peace in the Middle East: Addressing Concerns and Expectations*, Madrid, 12 January 2007

### **4. War in Lebanon**

**4.1** *The principal contributors to today’s conflict in Lebanon are foreign: Lebanon is vital to the Bush administration’s regional strategy, Israel’s security, Tehran’s ambitions and the Syrian regime’s core interests. As the July war reminded everyone, it is also a surrogate for regional and international conflicts: Syria against Israel; the US administration against the Syrian regime; pro-western Sunni Arab regimes led by Saudi Arabia against ascendant Iran and Shiite militancy; and, hovering above it all, Washington against Tehran.*

International Crisis Group (Middle East Briefing 20)

**4.2** The war of July-August 2006 was costly; damage in Lebanon was reckoned as at least \$15 billion, mainly in roads, bridges and other infrastructure. As a result of the conflict, 1,191 Lebanese civilians were killed and 4,409 injured. In addition, approximately 1,000,000 Lebanese were displaced and forced to flee to safer areas. On the Israeli side, 44 civilians were killed and approximately 1,350 injured, with an estimated 500,000 displaced. Estimates of the number of Hezbollah fighters killed range from 80 to 700, while 119 IDF soldiers were confirmed killed and approximately 400 injured.

**4.3** During the campaign, both the Moderator and the Council Convener wrote to the government, asking them to act diplomatically to put a stop to what was described as Israel’s disproportionate military response. Each received replies from the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Kim Howells MP, sharing the concern of the Church: *Our priority must be to create conditions to allow an immediate cessation of hostilities to be followed by a sustainable ceasefire and to continue to explore quickly how the international community might facilitate a peaceful, durable resolution guaranteed by the deployment of an international force into the area.*

**4.4** In Israel, the Church of Scotland hotel in Tiberias had to close as the rockets being fired by Hezbollah came close. In a show of amazing resilience, however, as soon as it opened again it was full for the weekend.

**4.5** On July 16 2006, the G8 Leaders, meeting in St Petersburg, laid the blame for the crisis squarely at the door of “extremist” elements (Hezbollah and Hamas), but called on Israel to show restraint. They offered their support to the government of Lebanon “in asserting its sovereign authority.” On July 26 2006 the International Conference for Lebanon was convened in Rome. Its emphasis was on humanitarian relief, welcoming the provision of international corridors to allow it to be delivered, including the use of Beirut International Airport. The conference also affirmed the vital importance of the Lebanese government being able to govern in all its territory.

**4.6** The Tablet (22 July 2006) wondered how the bombing of most of Lebanon could help the government do this, and called on Israel to concentrate its fire on Hezbollah strongholds in the south of the country; “*a ruined and terrorist-dominated failed state on its northern borders is the last thing Israel – or the rest of the world – wants to see.*” The Middle East Council of Churches concentrated on the deaths in Qana, describing these events as an “outrageous massacre”. Christian Aid condemned the targeting of civilians by all sides, noting that it was civilians who were bearing the brunt and suffering the majority of the casualties. This suffering was significantly exacerbated by the tactic of deliberately situating arms in the midst of residential areas.

**4.7** The fact that Israel failed to achieve its objectives, and that Hezbollah continued to be able to broadcast normally and to continue to use its missiles against Israel is perceived as a “defeat” of Israel, albeit at a huge cost in civilian life and a massive destruction of much of the infrastructure of Lebanon. The war also served to increase the tension between Lebanon and Israel, and increase the feelings of justification for Hezbollah (and Hamas). Likewise, the reputed 200,000 cluster bombs (dropped by Israel after the cease-fire had been negotiated but before it had come into effect, covering the buffer zone and making it expensive and hazardous to re-occupy) have led to Israel being criticized almost universally, with the notable exception of the USA.

**4.8** In Israel, the ceasefire produced a feeling of shock, dismay and political instability. The “failure” of the campaign has since led to the resignation of the Israeli Chief of Staff, following a period of national self-examination and recrimination. In Lebanon the position of Hezbollah has been strengthened – as has its reputation throughout the Middle East. The Lebanese government was not unaware of the significance; at the time Sa’ad Hariri, son of Rafik Hariri and the head of the Al Mustaqbal group (which constitutes the majority in the Lebanese parliament) said: “*Lebanon is facing a new wave of political and ideological terror ... by means of a timed and financed campaign aimed at spreading chaos in public life, paralysing the constitutional institutions and isolating areas in Lebanon from the rule of law.*”

**4.9** Out of this picture of chaos, where can the future of Lebanon be seen to lie? Can there be hope for Lebanon? As with many of the problems of the area, a large part of any solution must lie in a meaningful peace process getting under way between the Israeli government and the Palestinians and probably also some of the neighbours of Israel. In addition we see the following as important:

- Clearly, there must be reinvestment in Lebanon; in particular, to clear the unexploded cluster-bombs, which are effectively air-delivered land mines; steps should also be taken to outlaw the use of such weapons internationally.
- There must be willingness to negotiate with Syria and with Iran, and with organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, with the twin ultimate aims of disarming them, because they see no need to continue an armed struggle, and integrating them into the political (and perhaps even the military) structure. There is an excellent precedent for that in Israel, where the armed militia laid down their weapons in exchange for real political power.
- There should be encouragement from the international community – both financially and by example – for each country to recognise and respect minorities, be they different races, different faiths or different sects of faiths.
- There should be an international recognition of the major steps made by successive Lebanese governments since 1989 towards having a fully democratic multi-faith and religiously tolerant society. And there must be a firm resolution that each democratic country in the region has a right to security, and to an absence of outside interference in its affairs.

## **5. Christian Zionism: Hope or Despair?**

**5.1** The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism, reproduced below, shows Christian Zionism as an increasingly significant political and theological force and this section of the report, as part of a wider consideration of current developments in Israel/Palestine and the Middle East, is in part a response to that declaration. It also draws on the report on *The Theology of Land and Covenant*, presented to the General Assembly in 2003.

### ***THE JERUSALEM DECLARATION ON CHRISTIAN ZIONISM*** ***Statement by the Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem***

*"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9)*  
*Christian Zionism is a modern theological and political movement that embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism, thereby becoming detrimental to a just peace within Palestine and Israel. The Christian Zionist programme provides a worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.*

*We categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation.*

*We further reject the contemporary alliance of Christian Zionist leaders and organizations with elements in the governments of Israel and the United States that are presently imposing their unilateral pre-emptive borders and domination over Palestine. This inevitably leads to unending cycles of violence that undermine the security of all peoples of the Middle East and the rest of the world.*

*We reject the teachings of Christian Zionism that facilitate and support these policies as they advance racial exclusivity and perpetual war rather than the gospel of universal love, redemption and reconciliation taught by Jesus Christ. Rather than condemn the world to the doom of Armageddon we call upon everyone to liberate themselves from the ideologies of militarism and occupation. Instead, let them pursue the healing of the nations!*

*We call upon Christians in Churches on every continent to pray for the Palestinian and Israeli people, both of whom are suffering as victims of occupation and militarism. These discriminative actions are turning Palestine into impoverished ghettos surrounded by exclusive Israeli settlements. The establishment of the illegal settlements and the construction of the Separation Wall on confiscated Palestinian land undermine the viability of a Palestinian state as well as peace and security in the entire region.*

*We call upon all Churches that remain silent, to break their silence and speak for reconciliation with justice in the Holy Land.*

*Therefore, we commit ourselves to the following principles as an alternative way:*

*We affirm that all people are created in the image of God. In turn they are called to honour the dignity of every human being and to respect their inalienable rights.*

*We affirm that Israelis and Palestinians are capable of living together within peace, justice and security.*

*We affirm that Palestinians are one people, both Muslim and Christian.  
We reject all attempts to subvert and fragment their unity.*

*We call upon all people to reject the narrow world view of Christian Zionism and other ideologies that privilege one people at the expense of others.*

*We are committed to non-violent resistance as the most effective means to end the illegal occupation in order to attain a just and lasting peace.*

*With urgency we warn that Christian Zionism and its alliances are justifying colonization, apartheid and empire-building.*

*God demands that justice be done. No enduring peace, security or reconciliation is possible without the foundation of justice. The demands of justice will not disappear. The struggle for justice must be pursued diligently and persistently but non-violently.*

*"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)*

*This is where we take our stand. We stand for justice. We can do no other. Justice alone guarantees a peace that will lead to reconciliation with a life of security and prosperity for all the peoples of our Land. By standing on the side of justice, we open ourselves to the work of peace - and working for peace makes us children of God.*

*"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor. 5:19)*

*August 22, 2006*

## **5.2 What is Christian Zionism?**

**5.2.1** Christian Zionism is a relatively modern theological and political stance, dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This section of the report will treat the two matters separately but they are closely intertwined, the political implications being a direct consequence of the theological belief. We should be aware, however, that not all those who would call themselves Christian Zionists, or others who would like to see some fulfilment of prophecy in the creation of the modern Israel, would make the leap from the theological belief in the fulfilment of prophecy to political consequences involving expulsion, domination or oppression.

**5.2.2** The term Zionism refers to a political Jewish movement for the establishment of a national homeland in Palestine for the Jews that have been dispersed. On the other hand, a Christian Zionist is a person who is more interested in helping God fulfil His prophetic plan through the physical and political Israel, rather than helping Him fulfil His evangelistic plan through the Body of Christ (1).

**5.2.3** Christian Zionism is an ideological belief that sees the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, as being in accordance with – perhaps even in fulfilment of – biblical prophecy (ie, a political and theological aspiration perceived to be the desired will of God). The modern State of Israel is thus seen as deserving of political, financial, and religious support (2). It holds that it is necessary for the Jewish People to return to ‘The Holy Land’ in order to put in train the events which will lead to the Second Coming of Christ. The belief is not necessarily sympathetic to the Jewish People or to Judaism, because it holds that once the Jewish People have gathered within modern Israel, a significant number will accept Christ as the Messiah while the others will be wiped out. Many Christian Zionists are supporters of Jewish Zionism, but only as a means to hasten the end times.

**5.2.4** Christian Zionism can trace its roots to people such as Thomas Brightman, an Anglican clergyman in the sixteenth century, and Henry Finch MP in the seventeenth century. It began to gain in popularity with the millennial speculation at the end of the eighteenth century. Louis Way, another Anglican clergyman, took up the themes of the necessary return of the Jewish people to Palestine to prepare the way for the messianic age. It was, however, John Nelson Darby, an Irish Anglican, who did most to spread these ideas in regular trips to the United States of America in the nineteenth century. Darby added some of his own innovations (for example, that “born again” Christians would be swept up to heaven prior to Jesus’ return). Perhaps the greatest advance in the popularity of this thinking was occasioned by the publication of the *Schofield Study Bible* in 1909. The Christian Zionism of its day was popular with, among others, Lord Shaftesbury, David Lloyd George, and Lord Balfour. It may not have been insignificant that these theories coincided neatly with British imperial ambitions, and they came together in Balfour’s famous speech in 1919:

*For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country ... The four great powers are committed to Zionism, and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit the ancient land.”* (3)

**5.2.5** As they seek to deal with the inheritance Christian Zionism has passed down through history, the Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem describe it as a “worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ’s love and justice today.” (4) Christian Zionism, therefore, and those who promote it, clearly represent a very serious challenge to the churches and to the communities that make up that land which we (rightly or wrongly) call “holy”.

### **5.3 Theological critique**

**5.3.1** This modern theological and political movement embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism, and thereby poses some very significant theological and biblical problems for Christians and for Jews. Scripture, and the interpretation of it, is at the heart of these issues. The report on *The Theology of Land and Covenant*, reminds us that: “There is not, and never has been one agreed interpretation of Scripture in either Jewish or Christian traditions.” (5) Nonetheless, how we view Scripture and how we interpret it will determine our theological understanding of the current and ongoing situation in Palestine/Israel and, consequently, colour our political analysis and engagement.

**5.3.2** Christian Zionism is not, of course, the only theological response to the current situation in Palestine/Israel, but it is particularly worrying – for Jewish people especially. Whilst many would view the Christian Zionist approach to be *sympathetic* to the Jewish cause (especially in the USA), nothing could be further from the truth. Many Christian Zionists believe that, for biblical prophecy to be fulfilled, a significant number of Jews must accept Jesus as their Messiah; the rest will be destroyed. Uri Avnery is the leader of Gush Shalom, an Israeli Peace Group. He considered this particular issue in an essay in 2002, and wrote: “According to its theological beliefs, the Jews must congregate in Palestine and establish a Jewish state on all its territory so as to make the second coming of Jesus Christ possible ... [They] don’t like to dwell openly on what comes next: before the coming [of the Messiah], the Jews must convert to Christianity. Those who don’t will perish in a gigantic holocaust in the battle of Armageddon. This is basically an anti-Semitic teaching ....” (6)

**5.3.3** Christian Zionism, therefore, goes one horrific step further than Replacement Theology (or Supersessionism). It seeks openly to use the Jewish Zionist cause in order to achieve its own theological and political reality, with dire consequences. To claim that God favours one people, at the expense of others, lays waste to the claim that, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for [we] are all one

in Christ Jesus.” (7) Such racial and religious exclusivity leads to dispossession and, ultimately, destruction.

**5.3.4** The theological and biblical implications are obvious. The Christian Zionist worldview has cataclysmic consequences for a religiously integrated and lasting peace in Palestine/Israel. It attempts to build barriers rather than bridges between communities. It paints a picture of a God who chooses only one people at the expense of others when, in reality, the biblical picture of God in Christ is one who chooses *all* people. Christian Zionism portrays an unjust God, with an unjust people.

**5.3.5** For a lasting peace, with justice, in Palestine/Israel, tolerance of difference and respect for the other needs to be at the top of any theological agenda – for Jew, Christian and Muslim alike. Christian Zionism seeks to exclude and expel and, arguably, eliminate whatever is perceived to be alien to its cause.

#### **5.4 Political implications**

**5.4.1** Many within the Republican Party in the USA are believed to have Christian Zionist leanings, and this has undoubtedly been influential on the policies of George W Bush. Broadly speaking Christian Zionism promotes uncritical support for the state of Israel and opposes those who are critical of or objective about Israel. This support, not just of its existence but also of its policies, has been particularly vocal when the right wing (Likud Party) has been in power in the Knesset. Among the policies of the Israeli government which have been seen as particularly worthy of support has been the policy of occupation, as Christian Zionism emphasises that the Jewish People must have sovereignty over the whole Eretz Israel, that is the whole of the land identified as being promised by God in the Old Testament, sometimes characterised as being “from the Nile to the Euphrates”.

**5.4.2** Christian Zionism has become significantly more prominent in the last 20 years, since the establishment of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, and in particular since 11 September 2001. Perhaps the main annual focus for the work of the International Christian Embassy is the Feast of Tabernacles, a week-long event coinciding with the Jewish festival of Succot. The week offers seminars and teaching, worship and public demonstration. *“Up to 5,000 Christians from over 100 countries have come up to Jerusalem each year (regardless of the current political climate) to stand with Israel. This event has become the largest and most popular annual tourist event in Israel, taking place in the International Convention Center Jerusalem and other venues across Jerusalem.”*(8)

**5.4.3** Coupled with this support for Israel is a lack of concern for and indeed hostility towards the Palestinians within Israel. Their presence, it would be argued, is of no relevance in the eschaton. This lack of concern leads to a complete disregard for the indigenous Christians, because of the belief that God will bring about the final consummation of creation through the land rather than the Church. In practical terms, Christian Zionism legitimises the oppression of Palestinians in the name of the gospel. The doctrine does not promote harmony between Jewish and other residents in Israel/Palestine and actively views Muslims as enemies of Israel and of Christ.

**5.4.4** Christian Zionists also profess themselves to be eager for the series of wars which, they believe, will presage Jesus’ return. This clearly has important, not to say dangerous ramifications for the whole of the Middle East as a build up of military capability and subsequently wars themselves are welcomed. Christian Zionists in America are influential in ensuring the continued massive military aid which funds the IDF as the superior army in the region. It is this force which maintains the occupation of the Occupied Territories. While this continues, there will be no justice for the Palestinian people and therefore no peace with Israel’s neighbours.

**5.4.5** “The Christian Zionist program, with its elevation of modern political Zionism, provides the Christian with a world view where the gospel is identified with the ideology of success and militarism. It places its emphasis on events leading up to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.” (9)

#### **Notes to Section 5**

1. Louis Bahjat Hamada, *Understanding the Arab World*. (Nashville, Nelson, 1990), p. 189.1 quoted by Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Sizer in *Christian Zionism: A British Perspective* [www.christianzionism.org](http://www.christianzionism.org)
2. Rev. Dr. Donald Wagner: *Defining Christian Zionism* ([www.christianzionism.org](http://www.christianzionism.org) )
3. quoted by Donald Wagner in an article for the US newspaper, the *Daily Star*, 22.1.07
4. *The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism*, The Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, August 22, 2006.
5. *The Theology of Land and Covenant*, A Report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (Paragraph 1.4), 2003.
6. Uri Avnery [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_isra.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_isra.htm)
7. Colossians 3:11
8. International Christian Embassy website
9. Middle Eastern Council of Churches document quoted by Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Sizer in *Christian Zionism: A British Perspective* on [www.christianzionism.org](http://www.christianzionism.org)

## **6. What Hope for the Middle East?**

**6.1** There has been over the years a series of “if onlys” in the search for Middle East hope: if only democracy can be spread; if only the Palestine-Israel disputes can find an agreed settlement; if only security could be improved; if only we could “take out” the extremists; if only the kingdom would come. The truth perhaps is that hope comes not in grand plans but in small steps, not borne by the battalions but dragged by the desperate, not in theories but in people, not grandly on a chariot but humbly on a donkey. We looked for wider themes of hope, and by and large we failed to find them; but this does not mean that hope is absent. Hope seemed absent in the Northern Ireland of the troubles or the South Africa of apartheid, but in both places diplomacy eventually found a way through.

**6.2** At the beginning of this paper we spoke of the hopefulness of presence, the promise of olive picking – and it is appropriate that we finish by recalling that level of human interaction. The call has been made before for people to visit – to visit where the need is greatest, where the pain is most acute, and where life feels most hopeless; we repeat that call here. For where there is positive human interaction hope can still be found.

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