

Quakers

The Religious Society of Friends - Aotearoa/New Zealand

Te Hāhi Tūhauwiri

Peace in Palestine

New Zealand has a role in promoting and supporting international action for peace in Palestine particularly given our current position on the UN Security Council. The Northern Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends Aotearoa-New Zealand (Quakers) has prepared this statement to encourage people to understand the issues contributing to the conflict and consider taking appropriate actions.

The international community must act urgently to relieve the plight of the Palestinian people, stateless and deprived of basic human rights, and either under repressive military occupation by Israel in the West Bank and Gaza or dispersed throughout the Middle East. Palestine is defined as the territory encompassed by the British Mandate (1922-1948) and Palestinians as the Arab people (Christian, Muslim and Druze) whose roots lie in Palestine. Today there are 6.2 million Jews and an equal number of Palestinians within Palestine, of whom 1.7 million are Israeli citizens and live within Israel. The remaining 4.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are constrained within about 15% of the total land area. It is estimated that a further 5.5 million Palestinian refugees live in neighbouring countries, 1.5 million of these in refugee camps.

The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is sometimes represented as a conflict between religions, but is better understood as a conflict over land and identity. At the close of the 19th century Jews formed less than 5% of the population of Palestine and occupied perhaps 2% of the land area. Tension and violence between the two communities increased with the number of Jews but came to a head at the close of the British Mandate in 1948 when the head of the Jewish Agency unilaterally proclaimed the State of Israel. It would be a year before Israel was admitted to the UN.

The ensuing war with the surrounding Arab states was won decisively by Israel which annexed territory amounting to 77% of Palestine. The other 23%, the West Bank and Gaza, remained under the control of Jordan and Egypt respectively. Israel ensured a Jewish majority by the expulsion from its territory of 700,000 Palestinians who became refugees with no right of return. The Palestinians remaining in Israel were held under military law at first, but later were accorded citizenship though with limitations.

There was war again in 1967 and again Israel won, occupying the West Bank and Gaza to extend its control to the borders of Palestine. UN Resolution 242 called for Israeli withdrawal from lands seized in the war. The West Bank and Gaza were identified as areas within which a separate Palestinian state might be established. The border between the Palestinian territories and Israel is known as the "Green Line".

In violation of international law Israel has maintained a military occupation and blockade of the West Bank and Gaza for the last 48 years. It has moreover pursued a continuous programme of colonization of the West Bank involving up to 150 Jewish settlements, also illegal, and a network of roads to service them, restricted to use by Israelis. Hundreds of road barriers and military checkpoints, usable only by holders of the necessary passes have fragmented the Palestinian West Bank. This disruption has been compounded by construction of the Separation Wall that roughly follows the Green Line but makes deep incursions to encompass settlements.

Israeli policies to thwart Palestinian resistance to occupation include collective punishments such as curfews, house demolitions, closure of roads, schools and community institutions, and arbitrary imprisonment. There have been two major periods of civil unrest or “intifadas” in the West Bank and Gaza, the second of which was quelled by the use of tanks, helicopter gunships and fighter aircraft, and the targeted killing of Palestinian leaders. This coincided with an upsurge of suicide bombing within Israel. There is a lull in the war over Gaza, but the underlying causes have yet to be addressed.

Peace negotiations involving international parties have dragged on fruitlessly. For long Israel refused to recognize the Palestinians as an independent party to the conflict or to address directly Palestinian desires for independence and statehood. With multiple interruptions negotiations never progressed to a discussion of final status issues. Meanwhile settlement building and land confiscations never ceased. The vast imbalance of power between the two parties has encouraged repression by Israel ahead of negotiation.

The present situation is unsustainable. There are equal numbers of Jews and Palestinians in Palestine. Israel represents itself as a **democratic Jewish State**, but 22% of its citizens, Palestinians, have second rate status and it holds 4.5 million Palestinians as prisoners within the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. International support for Israel is waning.

Any peace agreement must address such concerns as the refugee problem, the status of Jerusalem and the future of the Jewish settlements, but there is widespread agreement that an essential condition for a just peace is the creation of an independent Palestinian State alongside Israel, the **Two State** solution. It has become increasingly clear that Israel refuses to accept such a possibility, typified by Prime Minister Netanyahu’s recent pre-election declaration: “*There will be no Palestinian State under my watch*”. It seems that Israel has no intention of achieving peace with the Palestinians, the alternative being to maintain the status quo.

There is great sympathy and support for the desire of Jewish people to have a haven from persecution within Palestine. Such persecution has extended back for more than two millennia and is still apparent today in spite of the shame of the Nazi Holocaust. It would be grotesque however to achieve this result by the victimization and displacement of an entire people, the Palestinians.

International pressure must be brought to bear on Israel to encourage it to enter peace negotiations in good faith with the Palestinians, acknowledging that self-determination with full human rights for all parties is the intended outcome.

Actions that individual New Zealanders can take to assist are to:

- Participate in the international BDS (Boycott, Divest and Sanctions) campaign.
- Encourage Government to support at the Security Council and in international forums the achievement of a just peace that guarantees equality, self-determination and human rights for Israelis and Palestinians.
- Use local media to widen understanding of the Palestinian problem.
- Become involved with NGO programmes focusing on the problem
- Encourage those in Israel/Palestine who are working for peace in the area.

Issued on behalf of Northern Monthly Meeting

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