

A photograph of a landscape with barbed wire in the foreground and a hill in the background. The barbed wire is coiled and tangled, creating a complex pattern of loops and curves. The background shows a dry, hilly landscape under a clear sky. The text "The challenge of peace" is overlaid on the image in a large, orange, serif font.

The challenge of peace

**In the name of their faith, Christians are working
for more justice in Palestine and Israel**



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to more justice in Palestine and Israel?
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*Gaza, 2002. . Israeli tank
and Palestinian schoolgirls
in the village of Beit Lahiya,
3 January 2002, before the Israeli
withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.*

Mat Jacob © Tendance Floue

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The signatory organizations:

CCFD-Terre Solidaire

The Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development, a French development association and Catholic organization, supports more than 450 projects each year that are designed and implemented by local populations. The organization, made up of 29 movements and services of the Catholic Church, with the help of its 15 000 volunteers also conducts awareness-raising actions in France aimed at fostering solidarity within the French society.

It focuses on bringing its partners' cause to the attention of French, European and international institutions in favor of a world that is more just. It has been working in the Middle East in partnership with Israeli and Palestinian organizations since the end of the 1970s. ccfd-terresolidaire.org

Justice et Paix

Justice et Paix-France has been commissioned by the French Church to raise a voice that is both relevant and evangelical in today's major debates and to help Christians to be active and vigilant on the subject of peace and international justice. The Commission was born out of the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* published by Paul VI in 1967, and has been working on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the 1970s. justice-paix.ccf.fr

Pax Christi-France

Pax Christi International is a Catholic movement created in 1945 in France at the initiative of French and German Christians. Convinced that peace must be the result both of an internal and an international process, Pax Christi aims to bring spirituality and the culture of peace to its members through training sessions, analysis, the setting of objectives and prayer. Every year, in France, Pax Christi organizes the World Week for Peace in Palestine-Israel, initially created by the World Council of Churches.

paxchristi.ccf.fr

Secours Catholique-Caritas-France

The Secours Catholique-Caritas-France, a branch of the Catholic Church, endeavors as an organization to build genuine solidarity among all citizens, in France and around the world. It works alongside actors on the ground in order to address the root causes of poverty and to promote individual development. The founder of this organization, Bishop Rodhain, began working with Palestinian refugees in the Holy Land in 1949 at the request of Pope Pius XII. In 1964, he also created the Abraham House in Jerusalem in order to welcome disadvantaged pilgrims and to promote a dialogue for peace.

secours-catholique.org

Why this commitment, as Christians, to more justice in Palestine and Israel?

Guy Aurenche,
Chairman,
CCFD-Terre Solidaire

Msgr. Yves Boivineau,
Chairman, Justice
and Peace-France

François Soulage,
Chairman, Secours
Catholique-Caritas France

Msgr. Marc Stenger,
Chairman,
Pax Christi France

Because we are committed to protecting the dignity of each human being that we see our Palestinian and Israeli partner organizations striving every day to defend on the ground.

Because we believe that the Palestinian and Israeli peoples each have the right to live in a state with secure borders and that the security for all must be guaranteed.

Because we see the Palestinians being dispossessed, humiliated, oppressed, trapped and driven to despair by the occupation. And that, moreover, it compels the Israelis to impose themselves by force alone and offers neither them nor the Palestinians any future.

Because we are witnessing the limitations of humanitarian aid, which has kept the Palestinian people under assistance for more than 60 years, while grave violations of their rights under international and humanitarian law have continued with impunity.

Because the Arab Springs have clearly shown dignity to be at the core of people's aspirations, particularly for the young people who represent these countries' futures.

Because we have heard the recent appeal launched by Palestinian Christians to the worldwide Christian community and because Jesus Christ taught us that we must not resign ourselves to the triumph of despair over life.

Because France and Europe have a past and present responsibility for the future of these two peoples, and yet have not used the full range of diplomatic tools at their disposal in order to uphold the international law for which they should be the guarantors.

Because, while the Palestinians and Israelis themselves must define the conditions for peace, **the people striving for justice and peace in Israel and in Palestine need our support.**

We believe that action is both possible and necessary. Let us pray, let us keep informed and let us embark on a different kind of pilgrimage. Let us talk about it and challenge our decision-makers! Let us decide to act!

Israel, a plural society

Far from being monolithic, Israeli society is the result of progressive waves of immigration bringing people of different cultures. Today Israel has a population of 7.8 million¹.

Israel's Jewish population is composed of two main cultural traditions. The Ashkenazi Jews, who today still constitute the bulk of Israel's political elite, have European origins. Their immigration to Palestine, encouraged by the Zionist project for the creation of a Jewish State, began at the end of the 19th century and gathered momentum during the 1920s against a backdrop of growing anti-Semitism in Europe. The survivors of this population decimated by the Shoah during WWII sought refuge in Palestine, then under the British Mandate. They began massively pouring in during the 1950s, following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. **The other great cultural tradition is that of the Sephardic Jews**, with its origins in Spain and North Africa. Although this community was already present during the Ottoman Empire, most Sephardic Jews arrived after the creation of the State of Israel due to the growing tensions between Jews and Arabs in the Arab countries.

Hence there have been several successive waves of immigration from all over the world. Since 1989, more than one million citizens of the former Soviet Union have settled in the country.



West Jerusalem.
A busy street, November 2012..
© Rob Stothard

A frequently forgotten fact is that 1.9 million Israelis, or 25% of the population, are non-Jews. The Palestinians, Muslims, Christians or Druze, who were not forced to flee in 1948 and now have Israeli nationality represent about 20% of the population. For some ten years now Israel has also been attracting thousands of immigrants from Romania, Thailand and Africa. Their presence raises questions about the place of non-Jews in the Israeli society. **Today the role of religion is the subject of intensive debate** between the ultra-orthodox community, which constitutes a substantially increased proportion of the population, and the defenders of secularism. Despite the country's strong economic growth, socio-economic inequalities have worsened. During summer 2011, 400 000 people demonstrated in the streets of Tel Aviv for more social justice. Although Palestinians' everyday lives are determined by Israeli policy, many Israelis do not feel that the Palestinian question concerns them. Due to the "separation" wall, contacts with Palestinians from the occupied territories are practically non-existent, and the new generations are growing up in total ignorance of the Other. ■

¹ According to the figures of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics in April 2012.

The Palestinians, a dispersed people

Nine million Palestinians are dispersed among several countries and territories. They are subject to various forms of discriminatory status and have no freedom of movement. Numerous families have been separated.

More than half of Palestinians (4.8 million people²) are refugees. These people are the descendants of the former inhabitants of the current territory of Israel who were forced to flee in 1948, during the war following the proclamation of the State of Israel. They have been dispersed for more than 60 years in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem. Their property was seized by the State of Israel, which has always denied their right of return. One third is still living in refugee camps.

Today the Palestinians of Israel (1.7 million people³) represent more than 20 % of the Israeli population. They are the descendants of the people who did not have to flee and were able to stay following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, becoming Israeli citizens. This was the case, for example, in Nazareth. Although in socio-economic terms these people enjoy a much better standard of living than the Palestinians in the occupied territories, they still suffer from discrimination within Israeli society and have been forced to give up most of their land.

Palestinians from the territories occupied by Israel following the Six-Day War in 1967 (i.e. 4 million people⁴) live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Prior to that date,

the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) was under Jordanian control and the Gaza Strip under Egyptian control. Since the 1993 Oslo Agreements and the creation of the Palestinian Authority in these territories, their inhabitants have held Palestinian identity cards. However, they are subject to restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities. They cannot travel to Israel or abroad without a conditional permit. Nor may they travel between West Bank and Gaza. The wall built since 2002 now separates the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the other parts of West Bank.

The Palestinian inhabitants of East Jerusalem (230 000 people) have a special status. This part of the city was not only occupied but also annexed by Israel after 1967. The Palestinians of Jerusalem thus receive a 'resident's permit' allowing them to stay and live in their city. However, this permit is revocable and becoming increasingly difficult to renew. It does not guarantee access to the same rights and public services as those enjoyed by the other Israeli inhabitants. ■



Bethléém, 2007. A Palestinian leaving the Aida refugee camp.
© Séverine Laville

SHARING: WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT PALESTINE AND ISRAEL?

Have you ever made a pilgrimage or taken a trip to the Holy Land?

Have you met Israelis and Palestinians or have you stayed away from the conflict that divides the two peoples?

Why?

What can be the contribution of such meeting?

² The figure corresponds to the refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

³ According to the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This figure includes East Jerusalem residents.

⁴ The figures for the Palestinian population are based on the last census conducted in 2007 and published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

⁵ One person may have several of the different statuses presented here (e.g., he may be a refugee and also live in the West Bank).

Historical landmarks

Palestine, from 1947 to the present day

1947– 29 November

The United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine (Resolution 181).

It envisioned the division of Palestine (until then a territory under British Mandate) into three entities: a Jewish State, an Arab State and Jerusalem, to remain under international control.

The idea of the Jews returning to Palestine dates back to the 19th century and the anti-Jewish pogroms in Europe. The process gained momentum following WWII and the genocide of the Jews.

1948 – 14 May

Proclamation of the State of Israel. First Israeli-Arab war.

Israeli military victory. Beginning of the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) for the expelled Palestinians. Refugees are placed in United Nations camps.

1967

1967 Six-Day War.

Israeli attacks against Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Israeli military occupation of the Golan, the Gaza Strip, Sinai and the West Bank, and annexation of East Jerusalem. Beginning of settlements (installation of Israeli civilians in the new occupied territories). In November, the United Nations condemn the occupation (Resolution 242) and for a withdrawal from the occupied territories.

1973

Yom Kippur War.

Unleashed by Egypt and Syria against Israel.

1974

Recognition of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization). Created in 1964, it is recognized by the United Nations as the representative body of the Palestinian people at the United Nations; Yasser Arafat is its Chairman.

1987

First Intifada.

Palestinian popular uprising against the occupation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

1993

Oslo Agreements.

Creation of the Palestinian Authority. Mutual recognition between Palestine and Israel and Declaration of Principles on Palestinian Self-Government.

2000

Second intifada.

Triggered by the march on Jerusalem's Mosque Esplanade by Ariel Sharon, leader of the Israeli right wing.

2002

Siege of the Church of the Nativity

in Bethlehem and of Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah. Wave of terrorist suicide-bombings.

2004

Condemnation of the construction of the wall (which began in 2002) in an advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice.

2005

Unilateral evacuation of the Gaza Strip by Israel.

The Gaza Strip remains under Israeli blockade.

2006

Absolute majority won by Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections

and, following that, a boycott of the new government by the international community. Beginning of fratricidal conflicts between Hamas and Fatah.

2009 – décembre

December Operation Cast Lead.

Israeli raids kill more than a thousand people in the Gaza Strip.

2011

Admission of Palestine to UNESCO.

The Palestinian Authority strives for UN State membership for Palestine.

2012

Acceptance of Palestine as a "non-member observer State" in the United Nations

Following a vote of the UN General Assembly.



UN PARTITION PLAN. UN Partition Plan of 29 November 1947 makes provision for the division of Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State and for an international status for Jerusalem and its inner suburbs. This plan never takes effect due to the expansion by the victorious Jewish State of its territory following the first Israeli-Arab war (1948-1949).



A map of the Palestinian territory under the British Mandate between 1922 and 1948.



In 1967, following the Six-Day War, Israel occupies the West Bank, (including East Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, Syria's Golan and Egypt's Sinai. The Sinai is the only territory to be returned, following the 1978 Camp David Accords.



In 2011, the settlements and their infrastructure occupy more than 43% of the West Bank.

Source : OCHA 2011

What they experience

The Palestinians feel caught in a vice

The Palestinians often recall the fact that with the Oslo accords signed in 1993, they agreed, in return for peace, to the creation of a State in West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but only on 22% of the territory inhabited by Palestinians until 1948. But since Oslo, this area has been constantly reduced under pressure from colonisation and the Palestinians are powerless in the face of the increasing violations of their rights.

Just before his arrest, Jesus, knowing the suffering that lies ahead, bids farewell to his disciples and encourages them not to lose faith despite hardships:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

John 14,27

In West Bank

Our partners’ testimonies since 2002 show how a large segment of the Palestinian population is enclosed by the wall and deprived of the right to move freely, engage in trade, seek medical care, study or visit their holy places, be they Christian or Muslim.

The Israeli settlements and their infrastructure now cover more than 43% of West Bank territory⁵.

The settlement of more than 500 000 Israelis has been supported by the successive Israeli authorities, which at the same time have neglected housing construction in Israel. In East Jerusalem, the Palestinian population is forced to leave the city, while settlers occupy the center of Palestinian neighborhoods.

OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) notes that, in 2011, more than a thousand Palestinians saw their house in the West Bank demolished and were displaced by force. In the same report, the UN notes that the lack of appropriate Israeli legislation with regard to acts of violence by settlers leads to “a situation of impunity” that encourages new exactions by extremist settlers against Palestinians.

In the Gaza Strip

Israel has been imposing a total blockade on the whole population since Hamas’ election victory in 2006. The bombings regularly claim civilian lives. 2009 Operation Cast Lead, during which Israeli bombings claimed more than a thousand victims, has caused permanent trauma amongst the population. Gasoline and goods enter the territory in dribs and drabs, there are power cuts lasting from 4 to 12 hours each day and reconstruction is impossible. Very few people are authorized to leave the Gaza Strip and only then in the case of a medical emergency, or if they cross the Egyptian border. **Although 80% of the population is living below the poverty line** and is dependent on humanitarian aid, it is now extremely difficult for our organization and for aid agencies to obtain the authorization to go there.

While occupation remains the major concern for the Palestinian population, the inter-Palestinian conflict between Fatah and Hamas, reflected by the division of the Palestinian society, has become a new source of difficulties. The international community’s boycott of the newly elected Hamas government and the Israeli blockade in place since 2006 have only strengthened Hamas’ stranglehold on the Gaza Strip due to its control over the tunnels under the Egyptian border.



Bethleem, 2001. Tantar check-point, Bethleem. In the background, the Har-Homa settlement, 31 December 2001. Every day, thousands of Palestinians must get through Israeli roadblocks and check-points in the occupied territories.
Mat Jacob © Tendence Floue

Confinement, destruction and the lack of prospects for the future

Another symptom of the occupation for Palestinians is the experience of imprisonment, which represents a true social phenomenon. In April 2012, nearly 1 600 prisoners went on a hunger strike to call for an end to solitary confinement, the lifting of sanctions (ban on university studies, breakdown of the supply of books, etc.), the permission to visit prisoners from Gaza and an end to administrative detention which can be extended indefinitely, without charge or trial.

With the blockade of Gaza and the wall in the West Bank, the Palestinians in the occupied territories are experiencing an unprecedented situation of confinement.

Up until the 2000s, the men went to work in Israel and

often spoke Hebrew. Nowadays, all contacts have been cut off. In Gaza, a generation of children is growing up without ever having met the Israelis, whom they identify with the noise of bombs, drones and helicopters. By continuing the colonisation in the West Bank, the annexation of East Jerusalem and the isolation of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government is implementing a policy of *faits accomplis*, which is in violation of international law and makes the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian state well nigh impossible. The Palestinian Authority, which was supposed to be temporary, is gradually losing its legitimacy in the eyes of its own people as the creation of a state becomes increasingly impossible. This lack of opportunities fuels a profound feeling of injustice and hopelessness amongst Palestinians and jeopardizes all opportunities for peace in the future. ■

SHARING: HOW TO REACT TO INJUSTICE?

The Palestinians are very often faced with injustice and oppression and wonder how to react: with anger, violence, despondency, avoidance, resignation, resistance, guilt feelings or reliance on God.

Each person reacts differently and also changes over time.

What about me: how do I react when I consider myself to be the victim of an injustice?

In the Gospel (quoted on the previous page), Jesus promises to give his peace, despite of highly stressful and divisive circumstances. Why does Jesus appeal to our hearts? What is this peace that he wishes to convey to us in what appears to be a hopeless situation?

⁵ All figures and data come from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
See document *On the humanitarian impact of Israeli settlement policies*, January 2012.

Palestinian Christians issue an

Testimonies

Who are the Palestinian Christians?

Claudette Habesch, Executive Secretary of Caritas-Jerusalem, likes to introduce herself as follows when she comes to Europe to testify: *"I am an Arab. I don't consider myself as being part of a minority. I am a Christian; I belong to the Universal Church. [...] We are both Palestine and the Church".* In the Holy Land, Christians share a way of life and destiny with Muslims.

Palestinian Christians are confronted with the same discriminatory measures in Israel and with the same consequences of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Bernard Sabella, Executive Secretary of the Department for Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches, relates the challenges facing Christians, many of whom go into exile when a new crisis erupts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: *"My concern today is that more and more Christians are choosing to leave. But contrary to what I'm often told, it is not Muslim fundamentalism that forces Christians into exile. Yes, the Islamisation of Palestinian society is a fact that creates difficulties for Christians. However, it is not their main problem. What we are concerned about for the moment is the situation that has arisen as a result of the occupation".* ■



City of Gaza, April 2012.
Palestinian Catholics attending the Easter Vigil to celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

© AFP Photo/Mahmud Hams

SHARING: HOW TO HELP CHRISTIANS IN THE HOLY LAND?

In the face of suffering, we learn not to judge and to avoid offering all-too-easy standard phrases as a means of comfort.

We also learn to listen and to understand. Does a person who is going through an ordeal have something to teach us?

Based on the extracts from the Kairos (next page), what strikes me most in this appeal by Palestinian Christians? How to respond to their appeal?

appeal

The 2010 “Kairos”

In 2010, a number of Christians from the Holy Land issued an appeal to the entire Christian community, the “Kairos Palestine”, which has been signed by all church leaders in Jerusalem and by more than 2 300 Palestinian Christians. Here are some excerpts from their message⁶:

“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 God (...)”

“Our future and the Israeli’s are one. Either the cycle of violence that destroys both of us, or peace that will benefit both. We call on Israel to give up its injustice towards us, not to twist the truth of reality of the occupation by pretending that it is a battle against terrorism”.

“Our message to the Muslims is a message of love and of living together and a call to reject fanaticism and extremism. It is also a message to the world that Muslims are neither to be stereotyped as the enemy nor caricatured as terrorists but rather to be lived with in peace and engaged with in dialogue”.

The document also demands **“that all peoples, political leaders and decision-makers put pressure on Israel and take legal measures in order to oblige its government to put an end to its oppression and disregard for the international law”.**

“As Palestinian Christians we hope that this document will provide the turning point to focus the efforts of all peace-loving peoples in the world, especially our Christian sisters and brothers. We hope also that it will be welcomed positively and will receive strong support, as was the South Africa Kairos document launched in 1985, which, at that time proved to be a tool in the struggle against oppression and occupation”. ■

Kairos is a Greek word for time. Contrasting with *chronos*, meaning ordinary or chronological time, *kairos* means holy or God-given time, time laden with meaning and choice. Kairos signals a time of new possibilities to repent and a time of renewal: “Now is the right time for action”. Recognizing *kairos* means acknowledging that the time to act for justice is now.



Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, during the pilgrimage « Aux Sources – Terre Sainte 2009 », July 28, 2009.

© P. Razzo/CIRIC

⁶ The text is available on Kairos website : www.kairopalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf

Listening to Israelis

Israelis marked by fear and insecurity

The Jewish people's very existence came under threat in the whole Europe; it was the victim of a genocide that claimed six million lives, with no

protection from any nation or international institution. Marked by this past, many Jews and Israelis live with a deep feeling of insecurity and anxiety.

Following the Shoah, the State of Israel's declaration of independence in 1948 was a source of great hope for many Jews, who hoped that this State would protect them from the persecution experienced in Europe and enable them to create their own political system. This trauma, mingled with hope, almost certainly led Israelis – but also many Europeans and Americans – to ignore the price paid by the Palestinian population, more than half of which was dispossessed and forced into exile from 1948 onwards.

The Israeli-Arab wars and the terrorist and rocket attacks against civil society refueled the Israelis' anxiety. The idea that Arabs will never accept their existence has imposed itself. In spite of the Israelis' overwhelming military superiority, that fear remains omnipresent in Israeli society.

However, some Israelis are critical of the way in which some Israeli politicians exploit this fear in order to keep their hold on power and legitimize the systematic use of force against Palestinians “instead of warning against the dangers of continuing the conflict”⁷. They are concerned about the threat to Israel's democracy of continuing to expand the settlements. Avraham Burg, Labor MP and former Speaker of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), has continually alerted his fellow citizens to this danger, criticizing the blindness of Israeli governments who encourage settlements: *“Anyone who wants to erase the pre-1967 border is essentially asking to erase the basic values on which the State of Israel was established: democracy, equality, the rule of law, secularism and modernity. Colonising Palestinian land (...) goes against those values. It generates fanatic, nationalistic, fundamentalist and anti-democratic energies that threaten Israeli foundations”*⁸. Refusing to engage in silent pessimism, Avraham Burg calls for an end to occupation: *“I consider it my duty to create a kind of alternative to the policy of despair and violence. [...] Peace is the best existing means of ensuring our security”*⁹.

Voices speak out

Israeli voices are also being raised to denounce the consequences of occupation and the massive violations of human rights towards the Palestinians. They are concerned about the future of Israel's values in this context of permanent war. Elik Elhanan, member of the organization Combatants for Peace and former parachutist in the Israeli army, remembers his military service in the occupied territories in a cutting way: *"At the military checkpoints you are no longer right-wing or left-wing. You are like God, and you are mad at these people that put you in this situation, so you treat them like animals"*.

Some people, such as Eitan Bronstein, member of the organization Zochrot, raise questions about Israel's identity: *"If we wish to remain democratic, we cannot content ourselves with the ideology of Jewish exclusivity. We can be Zionist without claiming exclusive rights to this land"*. They hope that some day the two peoples will be able to live in peace, with equal rights. Convinced that security is a common good that can be built by the peoples of the region and that these voices are the future forces for peace, our organizations have chosen to support these associations in order to help them make themselves heard in a society in which they are still a minority. ■

⁷ Akiva Helder, chief political columnist and editor of the *Ha'aretz* daily newspaper, "Putting an end to the political exploitation of fear", article published in *Ha'aretz* and translated into French in *Courrier International* on the 28 December 2010.

⁸ "Yes to the 'made in Israel' that does not include the settlements", position paper published in *Le Monde* on 5 June 2012.

⁹ Interview with Ari Shavit, *Ha'aretz*, 14 November 2003, translated into French on the "La Paix Maintenant" (Peace Now) website: lapaixmaintenant.org

Protest at Sheikh Jarrah. An Israeli protests against the eviction by the army of a Palestinian family from its home and its replacement by settlers. Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, 2 August 2009. © Virginie Nguyen Hoang



In September 2002, 27 Israeli Air Force pilots published a letter in which they explained why they refused to take part in the bombing of areas inhabited by Palestinian civilians:

*"We, Air Force pilots who were raised on the values of Zionism, sacrifice, and contributing to the state of Israel [...], refuse to take part in Air Force attacks on civilian population centers [...]. These actions are illegal and immoral, and are a direct result of the ongoing occupation which is corrupting the Israeli society. [...]
We shall continue to serve in the Israel Defense Forces and the Air Force on every mission in defense of the State of Israel".*

SHARING: OBEYING OUR CONSCIENCE

On what criteria is these officers' refusal to take part in certain attacks based?

Is it easy to obey our consciences and to go against the apparent expectations of society or our families?

Am I also capable of making choices that challenge my pre-conceived ideas, my fears or my way of life?

What can we learn from these soldiers?



Pope Benedict XVI in the Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem, 13 May 2009.

That day, he said: "Although walls can be easily built, we know that they don't always remain: they can be broken down".

Alessia Giuliani © CPP/CIRIC

Catholicism, Judaism

and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Since Vatican II and the Nostra Aetate declaration, the Catholic Church has made major theological advances in the area of interreligious dialogue, in particular with Judaism. This dynamic led John Paul II to conduct a very specific reflection¹⁰ on the Shoah, in which the Church “deeply regrets the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church” and “begs forgiveness for all that could in any way have contributed to the scourge of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism”. Conscious of “past sins”, the Church wishes to eradicate all anti-Jewish feelings among Christians and to encourage Catholics to be vigilant in this respect. It also calls for the recognition of a common spiritual heritage with Judaism.

As regards to the situation in the Middle East, the Catholic Church has long endeavored to draw a distinction between religious and political issues. “The Holy See also knows that for Jews throughout the world, the connection with the land of their forefathers is important. It understands and respects it. But it notes that the ambition for religious dialogue and respect for the Hebrew people and its history should be strictly separated from political ambition. The existence of the State of Israel and its political choices must not be viewed from a purely religious perspective, but from their references to common principles of international law”.¹¹

Following the Oslo Accords, the Vatican signed a fundamental agreement with Israel in 1993 and with the Palestinian Authority in 2000.

During his visit to the Holy Land on the 3rd of June 2009, Pope Benedict XVI recalled “the urgent need for a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in respect of the rights of all, including the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for the creation of a sovereign state”. During his visit to Lebanon in September 2012, the Pope also underlined in his apostolic exhortation that the Church “supports and promotes any effort for peace in the world and in particular in the Middle East. In various ways, it is working hard to help people to live in peace and it also fosters the international legal arsenal which consolidates it”.¹² ■

SHARING: HOW TO STRIKE A BALANCE IN MY ANALYSIS OF THIS CONFLICT?

Is feeling closer to one or the other people leads me to reject the other one?

What are the feelings that are guiding me: friendship, empathy, condescension, a feeling of guilt, indifference?

What chance am I giving the other of reaching me?

What freedom do I have in my commitment?

Historic visit of John Paul II to the Synagogue of Rome, 1986.

The Pope is welcomed by Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff. It is the first time that a Pope officially enters a synagogue. © CPP/CIRIC



¹⁰ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Message of Pope John Paul II on March 16, 1998. We remember: a reflection on the Shoah.

¹¹ Statement by the Director of the Holy See Press Office on 25 January 1991 regarding Israel.

¹² Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation for Middle East, homily of the Holy Father Benedict XVI, on September 16, 2012.



Jerusalem. The Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Holy City for the three monotheist religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
© Séverine Laville

A regional issue

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict also has a regional dimension that, even if it is not the only factor of instability, continues to affect peace and development in the region.

The absence of prospects for the future for Palestinian refugees in the Arab countries neighboring Israel, the annexation of East Jerusalem and the occupation of the Syrian Golan, West Bank and the Gaza Strip have for a long time been factors of instability in the Middle East. Jordan and Lebanon have been seriously destabilized by the presence of Palestinian refugees in the past. Lebanon regularly used to be the scene of direct and indirect clashes between Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians and Iranians. Historically, many dictatorial regimes and Islamist fundamentalist movements have tried to exploit the Palestinian struggle to serve their own interests.

Nowadays, the Middle East is also confronted with unprecedented changes that are leading to a general reconfiguration of the region: Arab revolutions that are a source of hope but also uncertainty, regime change in Egypt, democratic aspirations violently repressed in Iran and Syria, salafist proselitizing¹³, Iranian activism, tensions between Sunnites and Shiites... Balances are strongly being called into question.

In this context, the escalating bid for conventional and nuclear weapons is an additional element in the exacerbation of conflicts. In this regard, the reluctance of states to regulate the global trade in conventional weapons is alarming, as is the limited response to the call by the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference on May the 28, 2010 for a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. ■

¹³ Salafism is composed of different religious groups which all lay claim to an original Islam and a literal reading of the Koran. They condemn both the practices of popular Islam, which they accuse of being 'superstitions', and a large part of Muslim theological reflection.



Finul. A soldier from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) attempting to calm the situation at the Lebanese-Israeli border, 3 August 2010..
© AFP Photo/Ali Diya

The Synod of Bishops for the Middle East meeting in Rome in October 2010 underlined the issue represented by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the whole region.

“The citizens of the countries of the Middle East call upon the international community, particularly the United Nations, conscientiously to work to find a peaceful, just and definitive solution in the region, through the application of the Security Council’s resolution and taking the necessary legal steps to put an end to the occupation of the different Arabic countries. The Palestinian people will thus have an independent and sovereign homeland where

they can live with dignity and security. The State of Israel will be able to enjoy peace and security within their international recognized borders. The Holy City of Jerusalem will be able to acquire its proper status, which respects its particular character, its holiness and the religious patrimony of the three religions: Jewish, Christian and Muslim. We hope that the two-State-solution might become a reality and not remain a dream only”.

Why a public commitment for the respect of international law?

For decades now the international community has been sending aid to the Palestinians. The Secours Catholique and CCFD-Terre Solidaire, which support partners in the education, health, agriculture and employment sectors, are in a position to recognize the limits of such assistance. Every aspect of the Palestinians' lives is severely affected by the occupation, whether it is in production, trade, travel, studies, work or medical care. **What the Palestinian organizations we work with expect from Europeans these days is not just humanitarian aid, but also a stronger political investment, in order to release the stranglehold of the settlements in the West Bank and the blockade of the Gaza Strip.**

This understanding of the limits of international aid and the expectations of our partners engaged in non-violent resistance and in dialogue between peoples lead us to increase awareness among the French population and to raise the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – as other issues – with the public authorities.

One may be inclined, or on the contrary afraid, to take sides for one of the two peoples and thus find oneself in a “pro-Palestinian” or “pro-Israeli” camp. Hence each would be required to choose its camp, without any alternative reading of the conflict. **Yet there are other ways of addressing war: international law that governs the relations between states is one of them. And humanitarian law or the law of war supplements it.** The latter,

set out by the Geneva Conventions, is designed to limit the effects of armed conflicts on non-combatants and to define the obligations of the belligerent parties.

These international rules provide a reference framework for both our Palestinian and Israeli partners and give a common standpoint. The Geneva Conventions clearly recalls that colonization –which means settlement of civilians in an occupied territory – is illegal; that prisoners shall not be detained outside occupied zones; that refugees have the right of return or to receive financial compensation ; that all attacks against civilians, whether by the armed forces or terrorist attacks, are war crimes... Furthermore, in an advisory opinion in July 2004 the International Court of Justice declared the construction of the wall to be illegal and a violation of international law. The International Committee of the Red Cross sees the blockade of the Gaza Strip as a collective punishment imposed on the civilian population for acts for which it bears no responsibility, which constitutes a violation of international humanitarian law.

As non-governmental organizations, we are witnesses to way in which such violations of international and humanitarian law are making the conflict increasingly inextricable as well as exacerbating the resentment between the two peoples.



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For the Palestinians, they are the victims of a policy of 'double standards'. They note that the European Union suspended diplomatic relations with and assistance to the Palestinian Authority following Hamas' 2006 election victory, yet that the State of Israel continues to enjoy total impunity in spite of its repeated violations of international law. Even many Israeli organizations think that the international community should put more pressure on the Israeli government to abide by its international obligations.

All this prompts us to question the European institutions and France as stakeholders in the international negotiations. Let us not forget that Europe is one of the major providers of funds for the Palestinian Authority institutions that have been subjected to extensive destruction by the Israeli Army. We have seen – for example with the French vote in favor of Palestine's accession to UNESCO in 2011 and of a UN observer status for it in 2012 – how important the role of our country can be. ■

This is why our organizations, in coordination with many other French and European organizations*, have been calling on the French and European authorities for many years to:

- actively commit in favour of an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, an end to the blockade of Gaza, an end to the settlements, the land confiscations, the houses' demolitions in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, which are blatant violations of international and humanitarian law;
- show greater transparency and reduce their increasing exports of weapons and military technology to Israel;
- make more use of the instruments for negotiation at their disposal, in particular the Economic Association Agreement between the European Union and Israel, which is conditional on the respect of human rights;
- support the inter-Palestinian reconciliation process.

*See the website of "Plateforme des ONG françaises pour la Palestine: plateforme-palestine.org



Khan Younés, **Gaza Strip, October 2012**. A performance by children during a festival celebrating the 20th anniversary of the "Culture et Pensée Libre" association

© Culture et Pensée Libre, octobre 2012

Reasons for hope?

Because the local Palestinian and Israeli players whom we support continue working on the ground on projects for promoting personal development in all its forms and the ability to live together. In spite of the desperate situation, they are able to draw strength and meaning from their action.

After travelling with him, the Pilgrims of Emmaus, mourning the death of the Christ, finally recognize him: "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other:

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Luke 24, 34

"When young people open their eyes, when they start questioning reality, when they meet the people on 'the other side', something changes and there is no going back". – Adi Maoz is Studies Director for the Arab-Jewish joint association Sadaka Reut (meaning "friendship" in Arabic and Hebrew), which organizes meetings and joint actions for peace, in order to encourage young Jewish and Arab Israelis to strive for a common society that recognizes civil, social and political equality.

"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. Hope means not giving in to evil but rather standing up to it and continuing to resist it". – The signatories of the *Kairos* Call for Action from Christian Palestinians¹⁴

"I must admit that I was not expecting the vote in favor of full UNESCO membership for Palestine on 31 October 2011 to succeed. And even less was I expecting France to vote in favor! It was a wonderful surprise. [...] This call for recognition is part of our non-violent struggle aimed at drawing the world's attention to the risks facing our heritage as a result of the occupation". – Anwar Abu Eisheh, President of the cultural exchange organization Hébron-France, which organizes linguistic and cultural activities in the city of Hebron.

"The situation has deteriorated, but I still teach the values of peace and democracy to children. This is what continues to inspire me these days"¹⁵ – Miriam Zaqout, Director of the association 'Culture et Pensée libre', which organises events and cultural activities for women and children in the south of the Gaza Strip.

¹⁴ See page 13.

¹⁵ « Bande de Gaza, une dignité assiégée. Des voix s'élèvent par-delà le blocus », meaning Gaza Strip, a besieged dignity, voices speak up across the blockade – a CIDSE document, 2010, International alliance of Catholic development agencies, cidse.org

“It is true that the number of settlers has doubled in the West Bank during the Oslo process and it is true that the situation has worsened, but we must continue to hope, or else we will despair. Our message is to recall that peace is still possible. Giving up and doing nothing means death”. – Rami Elhanan, an Israeli and a member of the “Parents Circle”, which brings together Israeli and Palestinian families who, like him, have lost a child due to the conflict. ■

SHARING:

Do Christians, through their faith in the Risen Christ, have a responsibility for building world peace?

What role can we play?

What about me, what can I do?

A volunteer from the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program of Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) of the World Council of Churches takes a Palestinian schoolgirl home to protect her from assaults by settlers in the center of the city of Hebron. eappi.org © EAPPI



Some ideas for action

■ **Keep informed.** Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is omnipresent in the media, its component parts are often not well known. Seeking a better understanding of the situation is the first step before any involvement. Numerous movies, books and websites providing information will permit to have a better understanding of the conflict.

■ **Pray,** particularly at the time of the World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel of the World Council of Churches and at Christmas and Easter. It is also possible to pass on information about Kairos, the call from Christian Palestinians, and to organize a reflection on the subject.

■ **Join an existing solidarity network** through associations and collective actions: information sessions, awareness campaigns, petitions, putting questions to local elected representatives.

■ **Travel differently.** Visiting local communities is an opportunity to meet the actors for peace and to contribute to the Palestinian local economy. Testifying about it when you get back is what the local players want you to do. During the Synod of the Churches of the Middle East in October 2011, the bishops from this region recalled that *“Pilgrimage (...) is an opportunity for a profound catechesis, enabling the pilgrim to discover the riches of the Eastern Churches and to meet and encourage the local Christian communities, the living stones of the Church”.*

Message for peace

Extracts from the message of the World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel, an initiative of the World Council of Churches*

* oikoumene.org

It's time to be revolted by violence against civilians and for civilians on both sides to be safe (...)

It's time for all parties to obey international humanitarian and human rights law.

It's time to share Jerusalem as the capital of two nations and a city holy to three religions. It's time for Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities to be free to visit their holy sites. (...)

It's time to honor all who have suffered, Palestinians and Israelis.

It's time to learn from past wrongs.

It's time to understand pent-up anger and begin to set things right.

It's time for those with blood on their hands to acknowledge what they have done.

It's time to seek forgiveness between communities and to repair a broken land together.

It's time to move forward as human beings who are all made in the image of God. All who are able to speak truth to power must speak it. All who would break the silence surrounding injustice must break it. All who have something to give for peace must give it.

For Palestine, for Israel and for a troubled world, it's time for peace.



With the support of Chrétiens de la Méditerranée, Délégation catholique pour la coopération and L'Œuvre d'Orient.

