

Presbyterians Concerned for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Relations

A Critique of A Steadfast Hope: The Palestinian Quest for Just Peace (The Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church USA)

May 2010

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has significance that extends well beyond the Middle East. Not only has this struggle generated tremendous suffering for both Israelis and Palestinians, but the impasse has all too often polarized relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims around the globe. Furthermore, the challenges have frequently divided Christians into adversarial camps, locking them into competing and irreconcilable positions. The Presbyterian community finds itself deeply divided as it grapples with opposing national narratives and contends with a bewildering range of overtures and policy recommendations.

To come to terms with a conflict that is as complex as it is heartbreaking requires a disciplined and balanced overview. An accurate historical portrait of this impasse provides an indispensable foundation for constructive engagement with these challenges. There is, however, no historical account to which all sides currently agree, and the competing interpretations of the past will no doubt prove divisive for many years to come. Yet any policies that Presbyterians hope to advance depend upon a trustworthy rendering of both the Israeli and Palestinian experience, and no report is morally viable that allows one viewpoint to eclipse all others. Every portrayal of this conflict reflects the limited, sometimes biased perspective of the commentator, and therefore multiple interpretations are required to achieve a comprehensive understanding. Our denominational integrity depends upon an even-handed and scrupulously honest report that situates this particular conflict within its broader political, economic, cultural, ethnic, and religious contexts. Without an awareness of the range of religious, ethnic, and political viewpoints, Presbyterians will pursue simplistic and misleading solutions that only deepen antipathies and undermine our credibility.

One of the most strenuous efforts to frame the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been configured by the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, which

presents itself as an official representative of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This organization has developed an educational resource that in their words seeks (1) to provide the historical background to this current standoff, (2) to advance the denomination's commitment to peacemaking, and (3) to offer political strategies to achieve "a just peace in Israel/Palestine." These materials include a DVD and 45 page study guide. This resource has already been distributed to every Presbytery around the country.

In its pursuit of these ends, the Israel/Palestine Mission Network has disseminated a resource that attempts to redefine the role of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) and to align our denomination with a more explicitly pro-Palestinian agenda. Briefly stated, the Israel/Palestine Mission Network is charting a course that abandons the denomination's historic role as an impartial advocate for peace informed by the legitimate claims of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews. This shift entails a more critical posture with respect to the State of Israel and a denunciation of most policies that the United States has developed in response to this conflict. The consequences of this new alignment in terms of our credibility within the Middle East in general, and Israel and Palestine in particular are far reaching.

Religious communities have a right to bring their ethical and theological commitments to bear on matters of statecraft, not least our country's conduct of foreign affairs. At the same time every denomination has a responsibility to its own members and its neighbors to articulate its core principles and to espouse a position that is consistently applied in response to injustices in other lands with other peoples. The authors of these materials do not reckon with the implications and complexities of the position that they advocate for our denomination. A skewed historical reading results in a call to action that excoriates Israelis and exonerates Palestinians. There are no moral standards defined in these materials to which both parties are held accountable.

In their efforts to influence both the United States government's and our Church's engagement with Israel, the Israel/Palestine Mission Network is charting a path that will make a significant impact on our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. We are keenly aware that efforts to superimpose solutions on warring factions, most especially when advanced unilaterally from afar, rarely provide a durable foundation for the resolution of conflicts. Israel has consistently demonstrated that denunciations and threats from

Christians and Muslims do not build trust or produce creative results. Furthermore, the segment of the American population that is best poised to support constructive changes within the Israeli government is comprised of Jews. The failure to engage Americans and Israelis, excepting those who are outspoken critics, undermines the possibility of building partnerships with the larger Jewish community. This omission is compounded by the exclusion of American and Palestinian Muslims whose voices are essential to comprehend the complexities of the peacemaking process. Any resource that does not make room for the distinctive views that are coming from all of these communities fails the test of fairness and balance. Any resource that does not open the door for searching interfaith cooperation will polarize our religious communities, deepen resentments, and end up betraying its stated ideals of reconciliation and peacemaking.

Our denomination needs to learn from people who have very different understandings of this conflict. We need to hear the hopes and fears of peoples who live on opposite sides of the separation wall. The partisanship of this resource does not provide a basis for reciprocity among the conflicting parties. Instead of setting the stage for an honest exchange of divergent perspectives, this resource opts for a one-dimensional portrait in which the world is divided into “good guys and bad guys,” “victims and oppressors,” and “winners and losers.” This resource impairs the Presbyterian Church (USA) in the development of an essential spiritual and moral aptitude: the ability to listen and to adjudicate competing, if not contradictory, demands. The Presbyterian Church (USA) will need to weigh different recommendations and make difficult judgments about injustices in the Middle East and around the world. However, the policies that our church pursues will only have credibility if we demonstrate that we are a trustworthy partner open to and responsive to all those in the region (Christians, Muslims, and Jews) who are striving to create a new and just reality in a land that we all deem holy.

This summation, coupled with the following comments from scholars of the Middle East, reflects grave reservations about the *Steadfast Hope* resources and the appropriateness of their use in our congregations. We entreat Presbyterians to take note of the observations from the internationally recognized experts that we have compiled below. Their views of *Steadfast Hope* deserve careful attention and impels us to request that the Presbyterian Church (USA) refrain from using these materials to educate its members.

The line between fact and opinion is often blurred when commentators explicate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Efforts to find common agreement invariably run into so many conflicting interpretations that almost every point demands additional examination and greater refinement. However the observations that are summarized in the following text are by no means exhaustive and they reflect a broad scholarly consensus.

1. The historical overview begins with the First Zionist Congress in 1897. Most accounts of Zionism begin far earlier, at least with the rising nationalist and antisemitic movements in Europe in the mid nineteenth century. Nor does the film note the deep religious yearning within Judaism to return to the land. These longings animate and sustain even secular strains of Zionism. Without an appreciation of this background, it is impossible to understand why the Jewish community is so profoundly attached to this land.
2. The film does not explain that the territory known as Palestine was divided into a confusing set of sub-districts under Ottoman rule. When the League of Nations after World War I gave Britain a Mandate over Palestine (as the overview mentions) and France control over Syria and Lebanon, it was because the Allied powers defeated the Axis (which included the Ottoman Empire). Moreover, it is incorrect to differentiate between a mandate over “Palestine and Jordan” since what later became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was initially part of the territory of Palestine. The Jews were originally promised the entire Palestinian mandate as a place in a portion of which they could create their National Home. But in 1922 the British divided the territory, turning over 50% of the territory into trans-Jordan, which of course became the Jordan we know today. The Jewish National Home was then to be created in what we now know as Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. The importance of this historical point is that the Jews were not provided the kind of vast territory, which “Steadfast Hope” implies.
3. In the entry for 1939-47, the booklet neglects to mention the

Arab Revolt against British rule, begun in 1936, as well as the numerous attacks the Arab Palestinians waged against the Jewish residents. Instead, it states that the Zionists organized underground “gangs” that attacked British and Palestinian officials and civilians. There is no record of any “gangs” established in 1939. In fact, the Haganah, the precursor of the Israel Defense Forces, was aided by the British who needed to use Jewish Palestinians to help them contain the Arab Revolt. The more right wing groups that later fought British rule in Palestine were illegal, but not totally underground. The British rounded up their members on several occasions.

4. The entry for 1947 is also incorrect. It states that under the Partition Plan the proposed Jewish state would receive 56% of “the Land of the Palestine Mandate.” However, a significant portion of the original territory of the Palestine Mandate had been handed over to “trans-Jordan” in 1921-2, and the reason the percentage was so high was that Israel received the sparsely populated Negev.
5. The 1948 text in the film is equally misleading. It begins by stating that “Zionist forces launch[ed] a series of operations that induce[d] the flight of some 750,000 Palestinians,” without first mentioning the outbreak of full-scale war after the British left. They do not state that the Arab nations surrounding the newly declared State of Israel immediately attacked. The description of this war, however, only highlights the consequences referred to as the “cleansing” of Arab villages (hardly a neutral term).
6. In the entry for 1949 the authors do note that after the war the West Bank and Gaza came “under Jordanian and Egyptian control, respectively.” What they neglect to mention is that this is because those Arab countries actually conquered much of these territories that were to go to the new Palestinian Arab state that was to be created by the 1947 Partition Plan. After the war, there was a larger Jewish state than had been originally intended by the UN plan. There was no new Arab state, however, not because the Israeli army conquered some extra territory, but mainly because the Jordanians and Egyptians grabbed for themselves the territory that they defended against

the Israeli army.

7. The 1948 entry also mentions UN Resolution 194 on the rights of the refugees. It neglects to mention, however, that any issues of return or compensation were to be discussed in the context of a Peace Agreement. Since there were no discussions of a Peace Agreement, there could be no discussion of any outstanding issues on either side, including a discussion of the refugee issue.
8. The description of the 1967 war is one of the more egregious examples of misstating the facts. The overview speaks of an “Israeli pre-emptive strike.” Yet, President Eisenhower himself confirmed that the Egyptians’ blocking the Straits of Tiran was a *causus belli*. Since Eisenhower had been responsible for the terms that ended the Suez Crisis of 1956, his assertion that the Egyptians had broken their agreement was a meaningful statement. The authors also fail to mention that Israel had been surrounded on all its borders by Arab troop build-ups and that Egyptian President Nasser had threatened to destroy Israel in the anticipated ensuing war. In this entry, the authors not only reveal an anti-Israel bias, but go against the official evaluations that the United States made at that time.
9. Similarly, the 1967 entry misleads about the terms of Resolution 242. It is a far more complicated document. In fact, as the entry correctly states, 242 speaks of “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied...” Discussion still continues about what this means exactly. Since 242 does not mention “all of the territories occupied,” this remains a controversial document. Incredibly, except for mentioning the phrase referring to a “just settlement of the refugee problem,” the authors conveniently skip other parts of the Resolution that invoke “the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every State in the area can live in security.” Everyone understands that that section refers to Israel, and the omission of this part of the statement therefore neglects the key demands that this resolution imposes on others. Nor does the booklet include the demand in the resolution for the “Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial

integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.”

10. The materials imply that the Intifada was “crushed” in 1987 by the Israelis in the same year that it began. In fact, it only came to an end six years later with the 1993 Oslo accords.
11. The current suffering of the Palestinians is presented without any reasons as to how and why conditions deteriorated in the West Bank and Gaza. After the Oslo accords, the parties certainly appeared at times to be making progress toward a deal, but the relentless terrorist attacks on Israel from Palestinian sources repeatedly disillusioned the Israeli public and undermined leaders like Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak who might have negotiated a viable agreement. After 2000, the accelerated suicide bombings on Israeli buses, cafés, and public places completely overwhelmed the Israeli public and led to restrictions on Palestinian movement and Israeli troop incursions. It is hard now to remember that until 2002, Israeli troops had withdrawn from all key towns in the West Bank in 1995 (except Hebron, from which they withdrew in 1997). It is true that the Palestinians have suffered from the checkpoints, fences and targeted killings that began in 2002. However, the roadblocks, checkpoints, and separation wall for which Israel is vilified in this resource did not emerge accidentally. They were instituted to protect Israeli lives, and they have worked. In accounting for the continuing agony, “Steadfast Hope” ignores the fact that Palestinians have made some very bad decisions and that the amelioration of current conditions requires Palestinian leadership to take responsibility for its past mistakes and to actively resist being cast in the role of “powerless victim.”
12. Similarly, there is no mention of the two times that the Israelis withdrew unilaterally from territories they controlled: from southern Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005. Both withdrawals were disasters, resulting in attacks on Israel and in Israeli deaths. Of course, neither the video nor the booklet mentions that there is a reason Israelis have turned rightward. After the Israelis withdrew from the land that they controlled in

Lebanon and Gaza, they faced attacks and saw little gain in security. That experience diminished the enthusiasm for concessions quite quickly.

13. The failure to mention any Palestinian actions that might have precipitated Israeli responses is perhaps most pronounced in the 2008-2009 entry where we read that “Israel launches 22-day assault on Gaza. The official purpose, questioned by many Israelis, is to eradicate Hamas and stop rocket attacks.” First, this “assault,” while presented here as unprovoked, was actually prompted by Palestinian rocket attacks on the south of Israel. Second, whatever the problems with the Israeli assault, in fact an overwhelming number of Israelis (in some polls at 90% or more) supported the attack. Since they themselves were suffering from attacks from territories from which they had unilaterally (and with much internal protest) withdrawn, there was almost universal support in Israel for the incursion.
14. There are numerous interviews with Israelis who disagree with their government’s policies. Despite the fact that there are Palestinians who are critical of Palestinian violence, not a single Palestinian is interviewed who speaks against these attacks, either as a moral or practical issue. After all, each time the Palestinians have attacked, they have lost more of their people and more land. Thus, clever interviewing and editing makes it appear that both sides are uniformly critical of Israeli policy, and no one is critical of Palestinian policy. Of course, this is not the case.
15. It should be noted that Israel, as a democracy, has an openness that allows the video to be made in the first place. It is far easier to criticize Israel, and not Myanmar, Sudan, China on Tibet, Somalia, Syria, Iran, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and many other countries where human rights violations abound, but where entry into the country is carefully circumscribed, and criticism of the regime is either carefully controlled or prohibited, and certainly severely punished.
16. At the end of the DVD, a Presbyterian Minister says “I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” We can believe this statement, but

at the same time maintain that he does not yet know what he needs to know in order to assess the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is not necessary to believe that the Israelis are without fault, or that the occupation is a good idea, in order to see that the situation is far more complicated than the video and booklet would have people believe. A population that is shaped by this “educational resource” will be seriously misinformed and inclined to pursue policies that will undermine the quest for a comprehensive and durable peace, a peace that includes both Palestinians and Israelis—Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike.

Scholar Consultants:

Dr. Robert O. Freedman, The Johns Hopkins University
Dr. Christopher Leighton, Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies
Dr. Robert Lieber, Georgetown University
Dr. Steven Spiegel, University of Southern California
Dr. Nicholas Rostow, State University of New York