



The Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Lebanon, Jerusalem

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The increasingly dangerous situation in the Middle East threatens the peace of the whole world and places heavy demands on all those striving for justice and freedom. The Middle East is a region of special interest as the birthplace of three monotheistic religions. The churches in the area have their roots from apostolic times. Their continued presence and active participation in the life of the whole area, despite suffering at various periods, is a remarkable witness to the faith. They are facing new challenges and attempting to respond through new forms of witness. While only the churches of the Middle East can determine the nature and forms of their witness, it behooves all churches to strengthen their presence and support their ministry, especially the ministry of reconciliation and witness for peace. Historical factors and certain theological interpretations have often confused Christians outside in evaluating the religious and political developments in the Middle East. Recent developments in the region have further pushed back prospects for peace. The agony of the Lebanese war is not yet over. The integrity and independence of Lebanon are in greater danger than ever. The Israeli settlement policy on the West Bank has resulted in a de facto annexation, giving final touches to a discriminatory policy of development of peoples that flagrantly violates the basic rights of the Palestinian people. There are fears of relocation of the inhabitants of the West Bank and their expulsion. A large number of Palestinians are under detention in the prisons on the West Bank and in camps in Lebanon. There is escalation of tension in the occupied territories. The consensus among the Arab nations appears to have been lost. External and internal pressures have caused serious rift within the Palestinian movement. In many situations there are increasing violations of human rights, especially of minorities, and religious fanaticism is a bane of many communities. The Iran-Iraqi war continues to claim an increasing toll of lives and complicates inter-Arab relations. Tension is increasing in relation to Cyprus.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

We reaffirm the principles previously enunciated by the WCC as the basis on which a peaceful settlement can be reached. The UN Security Council Resolution 242 and all other relevant UN resolutions need to be revised and implemented, taking into account changes that have occurred since 1967, and such revisions should express the following principles in a manner that would ensure:

- a) the withdrawal of Israeli troops from all territories occupied in 1967;
- b) the right of all states, including Israel and Arab states, to live in peace with secure and recognized boundaries;
- c) the implementation of the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the right of establishing a sovereign Palestinian state.

We reaffirm that the Middle East conflict cannot be resolved through the use of force but only through peaceful means. Negotiations for a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East should include all those parties most intimately involved: the State of Israel, the Palestine Liberation Organization and neighbouring Arab states. The interests of the world at large are best represented through the United Nations, and the USA and the USSR have a special responsibility in this matter.

Churches should undertake the following with a view to facilitating processes towards negotiations:

- a) to build greater awareness among the churches about the urgency and justice of the Palestinian cause. In this connection active support should be extended to the UN International Conference on the Question of Palestine to be held at the end of August 1983 in Geneva. The churches should bring to bear their influence on states to participate in it;
- b) to encourage the dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis with a view to furthering mutual understanding and enabling recognition;
- c) to remind Christians in the Western world to recognize that their guilt over the fate of Jews in their countries may have influenced their views of the conflict in the Middle East and has often led to uncritical support of the policies of the State of Israel, thereby ignoring the plight of the Palestinian people and their rights. In this context we welcome the more open and critical stance adopted by Christian churches in the traditional Jewish-Christian dialogue, but we also urge the broadening of the dialogue to include larger segments of both Christian and Jewish communities;
- d) to support movements within Israel, which are working for peace and reconciliation .

Lebanon

The ecumenical community shares the agony of the peoples in Lebanon who have been tragically suffering over the last nine years and who have been carrying too large a burden of the problems of the region.

We reiterate that the recovery of Lebanese territorial integrity and sovereignty is a key to peace and justice in the region and that for this to be realized all foreign forces must be withdrawn from Lebanese territory.

We appeal to the ecumenical community:

- a) to support the efforts of the Lebanese government to reassert the effective exercise of its

sovereignty over all Lebanese territory and to support full independence and unity of the Lebanese people;

b) to assist the churches within Lebanon in their attempts with leaders of the religious communities for reconciliation, with a view to achieving harmony and unity among all communities in the country;

c) to continue to support generously the Middle East Council of Churches and the churches in Lebanon in their humanitarian and social programmes of relief for all in Lebanon;

d) to collaborate with the churches in the area in their contribution to the promotion of justice, dignity, freedom and human rights for all in Lebanon .

Jerusalem

We reaffirm that "Jerusalem is a Holy City for three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The tendency to minimize Jerusalem's importance for any of these three religions should be avoided" (WCC Fifth Assembly, Nairobi, 1975). The WCC should implement the proposal of the WCC Central Committee (August 1980) that dialogue be initiated with Jews and Muslims so that members of the three religions can understand each other's deep religious attachment to Jerusalem and so that together they can contribute towards political processes that would lead to a mutually acceptable agreement for sharing the city. The churches should give priority to this while continuing efforts to secure a general settlement of the Middle East conflicts. The special legislation known as the Status Quo of the Holy Places must be safeguarded and confirmed in any agreement concerning Jerusalem.

a) We call the attention of the churches to the need for:

-- actions which will ensure a continuing indigenous Christian presence and witness in Jerusalem;

-- wider ecumenical awareness of the plight of the indigenous Muslim and Christian communities suffering from the repressive action of the occupying power in East Jerusalem and other occupied territories.

b) We call upon all churches to express their common concern that although Israeli law guarantees free access for members of all religious traditions rooted in Jerusalem to their holy places, the state of war between Israel and Arab states, the political reality created by the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and continuing occupation of the West Bank means that Arab Muslims and Christians continue to experience serious difficulties and are often prevented from visiting the Holy City.

We uphold the churches in the Middle East in our intercessions as they respond to the new challenges in the difficult circumstances through their witness in the service of Christ. We assure them of the solidarity of the community of faith around the world as we have gathered together here in the name of Jesus Christ the Life of the World. We pray for the healing of the wounds in the nations of that region.

We stand together with other religious communities in a spirit of servanthood seeking to be faithful in our common calling to be peace makers and reconcilers and to bring hope for all.

* From: Gathered for Life, ed. David Gill, Geneva. WCC, 1983, pp. 147-151.