

ICCJ Report on discussion of the Israel/Palestine Conflict and its impact on Christian-Jewish Dialogue by the ICCJ Executive Board

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Note: This report provides a brief overview of the main issues, discussions and conclusions of the meeting held by the ICCJ Executive Board in February 2013.

Introduction

Prior to this meeting, the most comprehensive statement on Israel/Palestine produced by the ICCJ has been the 2009 “Twelve Points of Berlin”.¹

The ICCJ decided more than six years ago that one of its projects was “the conflict in the Middle East and its impact on Christian-Jewish dialogue and Christian-Jewish relations throughout the world”. Since then, ICCJ has been involved in a number of activities which come under the rubric of this discussion. We held our annual international conference in Jerusalem in 2008, entitled “The Contribution of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue to Peace Building”; we held a seminar in Israel in 2009 entitled “From Two Narratives to Building a Culture in Peace”; we produced the “Twelve Points of Berlin” in 2009; we responded to the Kairos Palestine document with a statement “Let us have mercy upon words” in 2010; and the ICCJ Research Council is currently undertaking a project on “Promise, Land and Hope”.

ICCJ President Dr. Debbie Weissman, with input from Prof. Phil Cunningham, Rabbi Ehud Bandel and Rev. Dick Pruiksma, suggested a very comprehensive framework for our meeting, as outlined below.

First session: What problems are we facing and what should be our final goal in this discussion?

In this first session each member of the board gave a summary of the situation in their country with regard to the question of the impact of the Middle East conflict on inter-religious dialogue in general and the CCJs in particular.

In the US for example there are a mixture of secular, political and religious perspectives. In Australia there are a number of differing Christian responses, but they are not as clearly defined as in the US. In the UK, it is often seen as the defining issue between Christians and Jews. There is a growing fear among the Jewish communities as Christian organisations are increasingly supportive of the Palestinians’ plight, but this can sometimes be manifested as anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic sentiment, rather than anti-Israeli policy. In Germany there is a similar lack of distinction made between Israel and Israeli government, and the moral

¹ Please see: “A Time for Recommitment: The Twelve Points of Berlin” (2009) on the ICCJ website.

obligation felt by Germans to support Israel leads to a feeling that they are not able to criticise Israeli policy for fear of being labeled as anti-Semites. The French situation is similar to that of the UK, but the fact that France is home to the largest Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe makes a difference. In Israel there is a genuine sense of fear of the past being repeated and of the possibility of a third intifada.

The issues common to all were: There has been a significant shift in attitudes from being historically sympathetic to Israel. There was a general sense of urgency, of frustration and desperation. In almost all areas, there is an inability to distinguish between Israel and Israeli policy. At the same time, anti-Israel feeling is sometimes recycled anti-Semitism. The lines between religion and politics are increasingly blurred.

It was agreed that ICCJ's goal should be to play the role of mediator in this conflict. We should be a witness to the two narratives and build bridges between our contacts. Being pro-Israel or pro-Palestine should not mean being anti the other. ICCJ's position is both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine. It is pro-peace and therefore aims to be a mediator between both sides.

Second Session: How do we understand the basic concepts pertaining to the conflict, specifically 'Zionism', 'a Jewish State', 'Land/Holy Land'?

There are a broad spectrum of Jewish perspectives on Zionism, including religious, secular, messianic, halakhic, spiritual and even post-Zionism. As Amos Oz said, Zionism can be perceived as a "family name. There are different 'family names'- national Zionists, religious Zionists, secular Zionists and even Marxist Zionists."²

There is a tension between religious and secular approaches to Zionism but all believe that Israel should be held to the same standards as any other state, if not even higher. From a Christian perspective, there are similar tensions, although barring the exception of Christian Zionists, there is a universalistic dimension; in general, Christians do not have the same theological attachment to the land as the Jewish people do.

Both Christians and Jews have a similar understanding of the definition of a Jewish State: that it is a place where all Jews have a right to return or call home. As Robert Frost said, "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in."³ There are, however, tensions between providing a place for Jews to return to and a home for those already living there. The interpretation of biblical texts is seen as key to the concept of 'holy land', but among all the land is seen as being given with commandments: "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

² Amos Oz, Interview with Richard Oestermann in "Every Second Counts- True Stories from Israel" (Gefen Books: Jerusalem, 2006), 46.

³ Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man" (1915).

It was agreed that the Land of Israel is central to Judaism, the State of Israel is central to Zionism and the government of Israel is a democratically elected government and can be criticized both from within and outside Israel. While the discussions among members showed a great variety of viewpoints, it was clear that self-reflection in the presence of the other is helpful for all.

Third Session: What are the points of agreement as board members?

After a lengthy discussion on a number of issues including right of return, the two-state solution and BDS, we agreed that it is important for ICCJ to act as a conduit, to allow others to take part in this discussion, and so we should not take a political stance. We revisited the ICCJ mission statement and affirmed our agreement with it and suggested that we could provide a framework for dialogue that our member organisations could use as a resource. Israel/Palestine should not be seen as a taboo subject amongst our members. The most important message to convey is that we should maintain hope for a peaceful outcome to the conflict.

Fourth Session: How do we continue dialogue with Palestinians?

In 2010 we responded to the Kairos Palestine document with a statement “Let us have mercy upon words”. Since then we have met as individuals with some of our Palestinian interlocutors, with varying degrees of success, but the initial dialogue in Beit Jalla was disappointing.⁴ We agreed that we need to call to the Palestinians to resume dialogue and there are a number of strong proponents of dialogue with whom we will reestablish a connection. Our mission is to provide a safe space for people to discuss the conflict and engage in dialogue with one another.

Fifth Session: Where do we go from here?

We discussed the need to act quickly.

5 reasons for urgency:

- 1) The situation of the Palestinians under occupation is intolerable.
- 2) When people are desperate, they sometimes turn violent and so there is the danger of a third intifada.
- 3) Israel is being delegitimized.
- 4) Long-standing relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims are deteriorating due to the conflict.
- 5) The two state solution is becoming less viable as time passes.

We will produce a framework for dialogue for our member organisations which draws on the ‘charism’ of what we believe, reinforces our mission, summarises our recent activities in this area, expresses the urgency of the situation, outlines our general principles and invites all to take part in the dialogue. It will

⁴ Please see: Jesper Svartvik, “Seeking Understanding to Enable Constructive Dialogue” on the ICCJ website.

provisionally be entitled "Responding in Hope", for as Dr. Munib Younan, the Palestinian Lutheran Bishop of Jordan and the Holy Land, stated, "As long as we believe in a living God, we must have hope."