



Mennonite
Central
Committee

MCC AND PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

Commonly asked questions

“As a Palestinian, I know full well that the people of Israel are not freer than we are. Both Israelis and Palestinians live in fear. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians have peace. Both Israelis and Palestinians yearn for security. Others cannot give us freedom, peace, and security. No government, no army, no wall no matter how long and high will provide for us what can only be supplied by the cultivation of mutuality and trust.”

-Jean Zaru



Christians, Jews and Muslims have abiding interest and investment in the land of Palestine and Israel. Mennonite Central Committee has worked in this region for more than 65 years. We are frequently asked by supporters and others about this work. This resource aims to continue those conversations by sharing some of the questions we are asked most frequently and how we respond to them. We hope this resource contributes to our ongoing engagement with all who have interest in the topics below.

RECENT HISTORY

For about 400 years the Ottomans of today's Turkey ruled modern-day Palestine and Israel. After their World War I defeat, Britain controlled what was called Mandate Palestine for three decades.

In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour penned a letter indicating that Britain favored creation of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. That “Balfour Declaration” responded to the plight of Jewish people, long targets of pogroms and massacres throughout Europe. The “national home” was to provide security and fulfill the Zionist dream of restoring Jews to the land of their birth as a people. “Zionism” emerged in the 1890s in Europe as a mostly secular Jewish movement working for a safe homeland. However, the home was to be established on land inhabited for centuries by Palestinians.

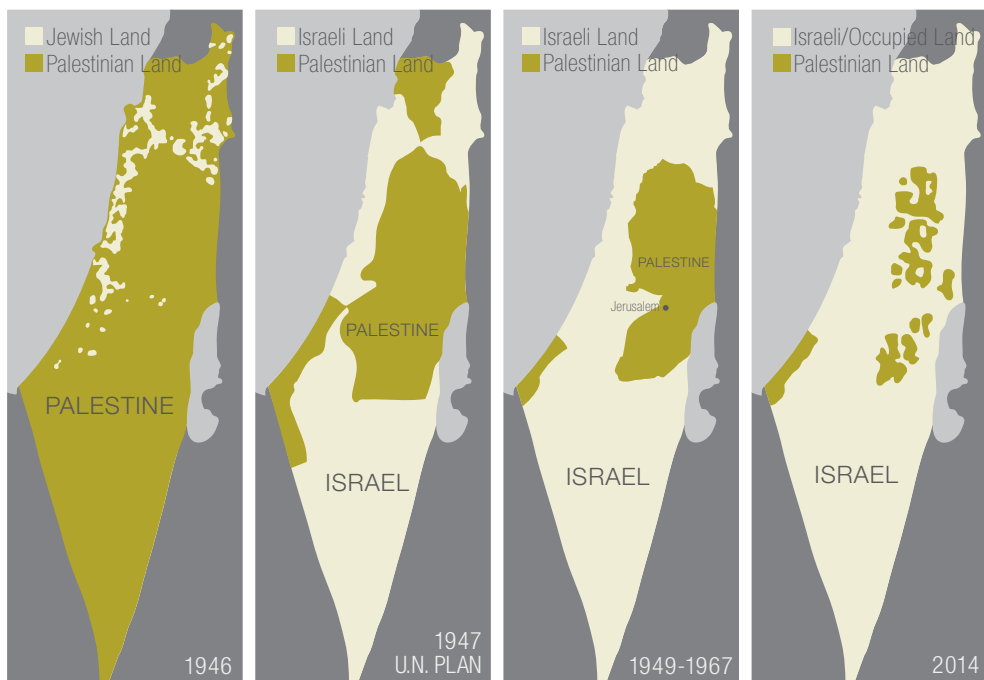
After World War I, and particularly after World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, thousands of Jews, often not welcome elsewhere, flocked to Mandate Palestine. Palestinians experienced the resulting loss of land they inhabited to be unjust. Other Arabs agreed. Together, some therefore fought both the Jewish immigrants and the British. On the Zionist side, Jewish underground militias fought British military personnel, as well as Arab targets,

both military and civilian. Thousands of Palestinians were displaced and their villages destroyed, including in 1948 when the state of Israel was created. The United Nations accepted Israel into the family of nations in 1949.

The Arab world did not accept the new state and continued to fight to reverse what they saw as the theft of their land, but without success. Thousands more Palestinians were displaced (some for a second time) in 1967 when Israel captured East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in a Six-Day War. Since then—and despite successive UN resolutions—Israeli control over what, according to international law, remains occupied territory squeezes Palestinians onto smaller and smaller parcels of land.

Today, Israel controls or occupies virtually all of historic Palestine, though the international community recognizes

PALESTINIAN LOSS OF LAND: 1946 TO 2014



only the pre-1967 borders. Its landholdings increase through creation of Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank. It opposes resistance—by Christians and Muslims, violent or nonviolent—with military force, mass arrests and detention, demolition of Palestinian homes and farms, and walls and roads separating Israelis from Palestinians. U.S. military, financial and diplomatic support is essential to Israeli government policies. Canadian diplomatic and moral support play an important role as well.

Gaza’s situation is particularly difficult. The Gaza Strip is 40 kilometers (25 miles) long and, at its widest point, 13 kilometers (8 miles) wide. Since 1994, Israel has enclosed Gaza with a fence on three sides and by control of the Mediterranean Sea on the west. In 2006, Palestine elected Hamas (an Islamist militant group) to govern, though ultimately their political leadership was confined to Gaza. Some voters favored an Islamic state,



Volunteers wearing MCC and Al Najd Development Forum vests deliver mattresses to families who opened their homes to other Gazans displaced by the Israel-Hamas conflict in 2014. MCC provided bedding and related supplies distributed through partner organization Al Najd. (Photo courtesy of Al Najd Development Forum)

“At first I was tormented with anger and grief; I wanted revenge, to get even,” says Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose 14-year-old daughter Smadar was killed in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem in 1997. “But we are people—not animals! ... There is a high wall between our two nations, a wall of hate and fear. Someone needs to put cracks in the wall in order for it to fall down.”¹

just as some Israelis favor a Jewish state. For others, the vote for Hamas reflected frustration over the ongoing loss of land and resources, harm to people by the occupation and political corruption. Israel then blockaded Gaza more tightly by land, sea and air. In response, Hamas turned to rocket attacks inside Israel. The Israelis launched three major offensives in six years, during which approximately 2,600 Palestinians and 100 Israelis were killed. Israel characterizes its military actions as a response to Palestinian violence such as rocket attacks and suicide bombings, while Palestinians regard their armed actions as a response to Israeli violence such as military campaigns, forced removal from their land and extra-judicial killings. Meanwhile, Gaza’s economy is on verge of collapse, water and electrical systems are in shambles, and the population of 1.8 million has been traumatized. Some West Bank Palestinians and some Israelis have experienced varying degrees of trauma as well.

Notwithstanding Lord Balfour’s assurance in 1917 that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine . . .” that is precisely what has happened. Despite multiple peace processes, just and secure peace for both Israelis and Palestinians remains elusive.

¹ The Forgiveness Project, <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/ghazi-briegeith-rami-elhanan-israel/>, story published on March 29, 2010, accessed June 13, 2016.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PALESTINE AND ISRAEL?

Did God give the land to Israel?

Scripture asserts that God promises land to the people of Israel. Some biblical texts suggest that God gives the land with no conditions or expectations.² Other passages place conditions on the gift. The Book of Deuteronomy, for example, details calamities which will harm the land or separate people from the land, if they break the covenant with God.³ Texts such as Leviticus 25:18 and 26:31-34, Amos 5:6-9 and 6:1-7 and Jeremiah 7:1-7 concur with this idea of conditionality.

Scripture also asserts that the earth belongs to God.⁴ Land is a gift linked to covenant responsibility in relation to God and others. Meanwhile, both Palestinians and Jewish people have deep connections to the historic land of Palestine.

Aren't the people of Israel God's chosen people?

In the Bible, we see God depicted as forming a covenant with Abram and Isaac, while also blessing Ishmael.⁵ Other texts show destruction, not blessing, for non-Israelites.⁶ Yet Israel is to be a light to the nations, so that God's salvation will reach "to the end of the earth." In other words, "chosenness" does not negate God's love and blessing for all people.⁷ God's definition of "citizen" is expansive, not exclusive, embracing the alien or sojourner⁸ and naming consequences for those who harm sojourners.⁹ In Ezekiel, God says that sojourners are to be treated as citizens in land inheritance.¹⁰

² Genesis 26:1-5, Exodus 6:8.

³ Deuteronomy 28:15-68; 30:1-10.

⁴ Leviticus 25:23; Psalm 24:1.

⁵ Genesis 17:20-27.

⁶ Joshua 6:17, 8:1-2.

⁷ Isaiah 42:5-9; Isaiah 49:6.

⁸ Leviticus 19:33-34.

⁹ Exodus 22:21-24, Deuteronomy 24:14-15.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 47:21-23.



The Aedicule—a chapel that tradition says contains both Jesus’ tomb and the stone that sealed it—rests under a dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. (MCC photo)

Christians embrace Jesus’ words to love God, neighbor and enemy, and to pray for those who persecute us.¹¹ Jesus, the Jewish teacher, says that on love of God and neighbor hang all the law, or Torah, and prophets.¹² As in all matters regarding a theology of land and chosenness, followers of Jesus are called to love all people, the Jewish neighbor as well as the Palestinian neighbor.¹³

What about the claim in Genesis 12:3 that God will bless those who bless Abram’s descendants and curse those who curse them?

For biblical prophets,¹⁴ acknowledgment of God’s promise to Abram includes a call to practice justice. Genesis 12:3 notes God’s purpose in giving the land to Abram’s descendants so that through them “all the families of the earth” would be blessed.

¹¹ Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Matthew 5:43-44.

¹² Matthew 22:40.

¹³ Matthew 22:39, Luke 10:25-37.

¹⁴ Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 11-20, Amos 6:4-7.

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS

Some of the world's Christians are aware that in Israel, a small percentage of the population includes Jewish believers in Jesus. Similarly, it varies how aware the broader church is of the presence of Palestinian Christians in Palestine and Israel.

Palestinian Christians trace their history to the start of the church 2,000 years ago. Ancestors of some have been on the land ever since, while others migrated to the land in succeeding centuries. Both groups count themselves as members of the continuous Christian presence.

Palestinian Christians make up around 1.5% of the population in Palestine and Israel. The largest group is in churches of the Eastern Orthodox family, with the Greek Orthodox having the most adherents. The Catholic family is next, followed by groups such as Armenians, Anglicans and Lutherans. Small numbers of other traditions are represented as well.

Most Palestinian Christians strongly identify as Palestinians, while seeking right relationships with all people. Christians and Muslims together suffer from Israeli checkpoints, travel restrictions, confiscation of homes and land, and other forms of state violence. They express a strong call for both justice and nonviolence that lead to real peace.¹⁵

Palestinian Christians are keenly aware of their precarious situation in the land where Jesus lived and died. For them it matters greatly whether fellow Christians believe that all people, including Palestinians, should be counted as citizens in the land.

“You are Christians because of us. We were Christians long before you were,” is the message Ashraf Tannous, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour, has for the worldwide church. “And now, we need your support. Not in money, but in prayer, in moral support and in telling our story.”¹⁶

¹⁵ See the Kairos Palestine document issued in December 2009: “A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering.”

¹⁶ Pastor Ashraf Tannous shared this message with members of a March 2016 MCC learning tour to Palestine.

Whether reading Genesis 12:3 as intended solely for the Jewish people or for all of Abram's offspring (Jewish, Christian and Muslim), blessing Abram's descendants includes a call to love mercy and do justice,¹⁷ while holding ourselves accountable to that same standard in our own contexts.

Is biblical Israel the same as the modern state of Israel?

The state of Israel has a beginning point, May 1948. For some, it is clear therefore that modern Israel and biblical Israel are two distinct realities – the state a contemporary secular, political entity, and the land a geographical place promised, given and repossessed by God in the Torah and prophets. Others see today's state as part of an enduring promise of Jewish sovereignty in the land.

Whether one views this question from a modern human rights perspective or through the prism of biblical covenant, all people are to be regarded as created in the image of God and as citizens, with security on the land and the other rights that implies.

What is Christian Zionism?

As noted on page 2, Zionism emerged in the 1890s in Europe as a mostly secular Jewish movement working for a safe homeland and to fulfill the dream of restoring Jews to the land of their birth as a people. However, the home was established on land inhabited by Palestinians for centuries. Christian Zionists believe that the 1948 creation of the state of Israel fulfills Old Testament prophecies and is essential for Jesus' second coming. They interpret God's land promise to include support for the state. Most Palestinian and other Middle Eastern Christians find this support troubling. Such support usually impacts their own local work and presence negatively (see "Palestinian Christians," page 8). Some other Christians share these concerns. For instance, a number of

¹⁷ Micah 6:8.

evangelical theologians “... see a complex relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament covenants” when it comes to Israel, Palestine and theological implications.¹⁸

What is an Anabaptist perspective on a Jewish state?

Anabaptists have long upheld the separation of religion and state. As some Anabaptists have experienced, states which favor one faith or ethnicity frequently discriminate against minority groups. In general, statehood is not seen as an end in itself. States can sometimes help guarantee basic human rights. Governments are judged according to the extent that they deter evil conduct and approve the good.¹⁹

A sovereign state, Jewish, Palestinian or otherwise, is a potential tool to realize the ultimate goal – the well-being of all people, including Jews and Palestinians. MCC works with both Palestinians and Israelis who are committed to nonviolence, whether they believe that peace, justice and reconciliation are best secured in the context of a two-state solution, or that this will be best achieved in the framework of one, bi-national state of equal citizenship. Because Scripture says that all are made in God’s image, Christians work for the rights of all to be respected in a nation-state of any form.

What is a Good News theology for both Jews and Palestinians?

All people are created in God’s image.²⁰ In God’s kingdom inaugurated in Jesus, none are elevated above others or granted privileges at others’ expense.²¹ The Bible articulates God’s love for the whole world²² and desire for everyone to experience new and abundant life.²³ The Lord requires

¹⁸ Gary M. Burge, “Evangelicals and Christian Zionism” in Donald E. Wagner and Walter T. Davis, eds., *Zionism and the Quest for Justice in the Holy Land*, Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2014, p. 178.

¹⁹ Romans 13:1-7.

²⁰ Genesis 1:27.

²¹ Galatians 3:28.

²² John 3:16.

²³ Romans 6:4; John 10:10.

that we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.”²⁴ This imperative stirs the church to act. Where the Spirit of God is at work, injustice cannot be ignored.

In the context of Palestine and Israel, this includes recognizing that “the land happens to be the homeland of two peoples,” as Rev. Mitri Raheb says. “Each of them should understand this land to be a gift of God to be shared with the other. Peace and the blessing on the land and on the two peoples will depend on this sharing. Only then will the biblical promises be fulfilled.”²⁵

MCC IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

What is MCC’s mission?

Mennonite Central Committee, a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation.

When did MCC come to this land?

MCC has been present since 1949, initially assisting Palestinian refugees from the War of 1948 with physical needs. Through the years, MCC has accepted invitations from Palestinians to walk alongside them as they search for justice, peace and freedom. MCC has worked with Israeli partners since Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in 1967. MCC supports the efforts of both Palestinians and Israelis committed to nonviolence and to a future of peace, justice and reconciliation for both peoples.

²⁴ Micah 6:8.

²⁵ Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p. 80.

Why does MCC work in Palestine?

MCC works in more than 50 countries, in settings where people are impoverished, marginalized or oppressed, due to natural disasters or conflict. MCC works in Palestine because people there experience marginalization and oppression.

On whose side is MCC?

Wherever we work, MCC is on the side of a just peace between societal groups or people in conflict. MCC does not choose one people group over another. “MCC does ‘take sides’ with the good news of Christ that reconciliation between enemies is possible and that reconciliation involves the doing of justice. MCC does ‘take sides’ against all forms of violence, regardless who perpetrates it.



Vendors sell pickled vegetables and olives at a market in the city of Hebron. (MCC photo)

“MCC also ‘takes sides’ against a false neutrality that portrays Palestinians and Israelis as equal partners to the conflict and that avoids the task of identifying military occupation, siege and dispossession as injustice.”²⁶ Israel, as an occupying power, controls the daily lives of Palestinians in matters ranging from ability to travel, to whether agricultural produce makes it to outside markets, access to water and more. A false neutrality ignores or is unaware of this power imbalance and the frustrations that it engenders, and offers solutions that are therefore ineffectual.

“Finally, MCC ‘takes sides’ with courageous Israeli peace groups and nonviolent Palestinian groups who struggle jointly against military occupation and through that struggle form new bonds of solidarity and cooperation.”²⁷

Does MCC help the people of Israel?

MCC supports Israeli organizations who promote a just peace, respect human rights and acknowledge historical facts regarding all the people in the land. In Palestine, occupation policies mean that basic needs such as clean water, food, shelter and education are severely impacted for Palestinians. MCC and partners provide relief assistance in the context of justice-seeking efforts. In Israel, MCC supports such efforts among minority groups in Israel who lack some of the same basic needs as those under occupation. In our experience, when combined with efforts of like-minded Palestinian organizations, both Israelis and Palestinians are “helped” as walls break down, bridges are built, mutual trust and respect grow and daily life has a chance to become more secure for all.

²⁶ Sonia K. Weaver, *What is Palestine-Israel? Answers to Common Questions*, Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2007, p. 68.

²⁷ Weaver, p. 68.

How does MCC do its peacebuilding work in Palestine and Israel?

MCC supports Palestinian and Israeli partners in their peacebuilding efforts, ranging from group-oriented conflict transformation processes in Palestinian society to Israelis walking with fellow Israelis conscientiously opposed to military service. MCC believes that each person is created and loved by God, communicates opposition to all forms of violence and supports efforts to address its underlying causes.

MCC appeals for the human rights of all to be universally respected. MCC seeks to raise awareness that in this context, the rights of one people group, Palestinians, are violated, and advocates for those rights to be realized. MCC affirms its Palestinian and Israeli partners in sharing their truths in creative ways – in writings, video presentations, works of art and more.

MCC has witnessed here and elsewhere that without justice, there is no peace. MCC advocates to U.S. and Canadian governments for just policies committed to the well-being of the people of the region.

MCC workers pray for all people – Jews, Christians and Muslims – who live in Palestine and Israel. We pray and invite prayers for wisdom in our presence and work.

SEEKING GOD'S LEADING

Join us in praying that:

- our eyes will be opened to the ways in which our beliefs and actions have contributed to injustice and violence;
- a spirit of love will enable all people to see the face of God in each other;
- political leaders will have courage to make choices for the good of all people in Palestine and Israel;
- all people may live securely, without fear and with dignity in the land.